



REAPER SCANS

TITAN



NOVEL BY PONDMAN

# HUNTER ACADEMY'S BATTLE GOD

# **Hunter Academy's Battle God**

– 헌터 아카데미의 최강 투신 –

**- VOLUME 2 -**

**-AUTHOR-**

**Pond Man**

연못맨

[ Reaper Scans ]

# Chapter 51

—The clear brook water.

Amy peered down at a crayfish swimming in its depths.

“Whoa!” she muttered, fascinated. “Do crayfish usually live in brooks?”

“Of course they live in brooks. Where else are they supposed to live, the ocean?” SiWoo was also drawn in by the crayfish. “So cool, though. I heard that the water has to be su~per clear for them to live in it.”

It was the moment that Sumire had been waiting for. Even so, she had a hard time starting the conversation.

‘...I-I’m just too worried.’

Her nervousness was even making her break out in a cold sweat.

Only then did YuSung finally notice the other girl. It was hard for him not to, given the fact that she kept glancing at him and giving him hesitant looks.

“Sumire, is there something bothering you?”

“Huh?! U-uh! No! Th-that’s not...”

Caught off-guard, she began waving her hands in bewildered denial, but that only lasted for a moment.

‘...Th-this is my only chance.’

Sumire resolved herself.

“I-I want to tell you something, Sh-Shin YuSung-ssi!”

Sumire looked at YuSung square in the eyes, fully facing him as she uttered those words, even if her hands were shaking. It was a marked difference from her usual behavior, considering that she would usually dart her entire head away from someone if they made eye contact.

“I, that’s... I-I’m not skilled at anything. And I’m not strong. But...”

Even as she was fumbling her words, she was making a proper point. Sumire’s clear eyes were staring at YuSung’s calm face.

She drew out more courage.

“Still... I want to be of h-help to you, Shin YuSung-ssi!”

But even her drawn-out courage couldn’t completely change her base personality. The other boy’s gaze finally broke her, and her speech fizzed into gibberish.

“Um, o-o-of course! It’s not that... someone like me will be very helpful to Shin YuSung-ssi, but. B-but, I want to be in your party... n-no! That’s not... I’ll get stronger so that eventually... absolutely...! Um...”

Sumire stopped her ramblings, then sighed, face set in despair. She just wasn’t any good at beating around the bush.

“I also want... to be like Amy-ssi... to be a member of your party, Shin YuSung-ssi.”

The girl hung her head as if she had performed a great sin in admitting that fact. Even if Sumire had shown some prowess, she considered herself at a different level from Amy, an A Class student.

She assumed that was the reason why he didn’t ask her to join his party.

—Because she was too lacking to be considered.



However...

Sumire would usually have, in that situation, just accepted the fact, but at that moment, she wanted to express her true feelings to YuSung.

—That she wanted to form a party with him.

—That if she could, she would try harder. That she would become stronger.

Sumire looked up at him with an earnest gaze. Her body was completely stiff with tension.

YuSung laughed with a puzzled expression on his face.

“...Uh, Sumire.”

“Y-yes?!”

“Did SiWoo not tell you?”

“...Eh?”

“I already registered you as a member of my party back when we participated in the dungeon raid competition.”

“Eh... a... ahh...”

Embarrassed, Sumire bowed her head once more. Odd noises began to spew from her mouth.

YuSung continued to speak amidst the awkward atmosphere.

“I told SiWoo to tell you...”

Speak of the devil, both SiWoo and Amy chose that moment to finish their crayfish catching session.

“YuSung-ah! We hit the crayfish jackpot!”

“Sumire! Can you cook these, too? You can, right? Let’s eat ‘em together!”

Sumire, on the verge of tears, began to blubber in SiWoo’s general vicinity to confirm YuSung’s words.

“Th... Shin YuSung-ssi told me... party...”

What came out was a barely coherent string of words.

But only then did SiWoo hit his forehead in shock, as if suddenly remembering something.

“Oh! Right, I totally forgot! YuSung told me to tell you that you’re already in his party. Sorry, I can’t believe I did that.”

Amy, always the perceptive one, began cackling treacherously at Sumire’s reaction.

“Hm~ what’s this~ were you worried that he wasn’t going to put you in the party? That’s adorable. You know, if you check the notice board, there’s a list of names there.”

Amy smirked and began to poke Sumire’s stomach with her finger. The other girl forced a smile on her face in response, despite her tearful gaze.

“...Th-that’s a r-relief, though.”

While YuSung was watching and laughing at Sumire’s antics, a call came from his Pocket.

“This is... the Association President?”

YuSung immediately accepted the call. Right after, a hologram appeared, bearing the face of Kang YuChan, the president of the Hunter Association.

– Huh huh! It’s been a while, YuSung-ah! I’ve heard a lot about your deeds!

—The sudden appearance of the Association president.

“Uuu...”

Sumire, surprised, immediately stiffened in place.

“...Th-that’s the Association president.”

SiWoo dropped the basket that he had been holding in his hands. The crayfish trapped in it escaped and quickly scattered off.

“Gasp! President-ni... Aah! Ack! Ack! I-I’m getting pinched!”

And Amy was hopping around here and there after getting pinched by one of the crayfish’s pincers. Kang YuChan laughed uproariously as he looked at YuSung’s entourage.

– Looks like you’ve already made some new friends. Good, you’ll need a fair number of fine allies with you if you want to make it as a hunter.

YuSung smiled in lieu of an answer.

Kang YuChan sent him information regarding a dungeon through his Pocket.

– I’ll cut to the chase... A dungeon that needs to be cleared just happened to spawn in the Academy City area. Why don’t you take a shot at it?

There were only five days left until the Representative Selections.

There was no chance of a dungeon that needed to be cleared conveniently spawning in that time. It was clear what Kang YuChan’s intent was—he had given the boy a chance to become stronger.

It was the sort of opportunity a regular student would be hard-pressed to obtain. YuSung nodded.

“Leave it to me.”

– Okay! How refreshing. I like it! The dungeon isn’t that large-scale, so three people should be enough to clear it. Huh huh, Mei Lin will give you the detailed schedule.

Kang YuChan gave off an invigorating laugh, at odds with his usual unapproachable aura.

And soon after, the call disconnected.

\* \* \*

SiWoo’s expression was pale.

“Wh-when he said Mei Lin... isn’t that the name of the manager of Academy City?”

“Sorry, is *that* what you’re surprised about? I’ve been out of it since the Association president came into the picture... to think you were on personal call terms with him, you really are the best, party leader...”

Amy mumbled, face set in admiration. YuSung waved his hands as if it was nothing special.

“It’s not me. It’s just that he and my master know each other.”

The pink-haired girl nodded in an exaggerated manner at the boy’s modest response.

“Right! And come to think of it! Party Leader-nim’s master is the Fist King!”

“You really are extraordinary... YuSung-ah... you’re the pride of F Class.”

SiWoo gave him a thumbs up, impressed. The fact that YuSung had a genuine connection to those two giants—the Fist King and the Association president—was a mighty unique circumstance.

Ring!

**[Boss Subjugation Request]**

**[Habitat: Mount Everline]**

**[Boss Name: Lake Dragon]**

**[Difficulty: Rank 4]**

**[Three Participants]**

**[Time Limit: 2 days]**

YuSung read the information that was sent to his Pocket, then looked around at the group before beginning to speak.

“Good timing. We happen to have a lot of free time, too. Let’s go right before the Representative Selection happens.”

“Uh, huh, what?! Heh heh... u-uh, actually.”

But Amy was pensive after YuSung’s declaration. Eventually, she opened her mouth and began to choose her words carefully.

“Actually, I-I have a broadcast scheduled on that day...”

“...Haha, YuSung-ah, I actually have an archery competition held outside of the school scheduled at that time, too... I’m not that bad with a bow, you know? Even if I’m F-rank.”

In contrast, Sumire was pleading to YuSung with her eyes to pick her.



“Then, for now, I’ll go with Sumire and...”

“Okay! L-leave it to me!”

—Sumire’s energetic response.

YuSung pondered over who to choose for the remaining participant slot. As he was doing so, he suddenly recalled the promise he had made for the next day: he had told EunAh that he would talk to her on the rooftop of the school on Monday.

‘Good timing. I guess she’ll be my third.’

It seemed like YuSung had already picked out EunAh as one of the participants in his head, despite the fact that she wasn’t even a member of his party.

Meanwhile, Sumire looked incredibly happy to be participating in the raid.

“I’ll do my best... to not be a b-burden to you, Shin YuSung-ssi!”

‘Mhm. It’s a rank 4 this time as well, so I’m sure it’ll be fine.’

Of course, a monster subjugation request like that one was different from a gate or Association raid request, but the difficulty level, like YuSung had just said, was the same.

Sumire was, in contrast to YuSung’s carefree attitude, igniting her own fervor.

‘...I’ll become even stronger!’

The reason she wanted to become even stronger was, of course, YuSung. A party member who was a burden to her teammates would not be allowed to remain a team member any longer. Therefore, Sumire had to become stronger to stay by YuSung’s side.

The boy in question, seeing the impassioned Sumire, thought: ‘She really has changed a lot.’

—A change for the better.

YuSung was the catalyst for her transformation, just like how his master, the Fist King, had been the catalyst for him.

“Then, Sumire, the hunt could go on for a while, so make sure to at least pack some essentials.”

“L-leave it to me!” Sumire enthusiastically nodded her head.

SiWoo was relieved as he watched all of that take place.

“Phew. Sumire, I’m leaving our YuSung to you. I didn’t think an extracurricular would be given to him so suddenly like this.”

“Right? I definitely would’ve gone with you if I didn’t have a broadcast already scheduled!”

Amy also chimed in, sounding regretful. YuSung shook his head.

“No problem. I’ve already decided on the last member.”

Three participants.

Excluding YuSung and Sumire, there was one spot left. Even so, he was confident when speaking so.

Even if the request was rather finicky and could take a while to fulfill, YuSung believed that the other person would agree to it.

‘...Because she’s the sort of person who hates owing a debt to someone.’

The last member of the subjugation request on YuSung’s mind was EunAh.



# Chapter 52

The president of the Shinsung group. Kim SeokHan.

Shinsung was called the greatest chaebol in Korea, and he himself had a notorious iron grip over his business. Despite all of this, the man was completely wrapped around his granddaughter's finger.

“And how has my EunAh been acting? She must have taken such a huge shock! Especially since she personally went through... so much!”

Lee SuHyun found that side of Kim SeokHan fascinating.

‘How can a man so strong-willed against others bend his back so far for his granddaughter?’

She kept those thoughts to herself. Instead, she respectfully bowed her head and began to respond.

“Miss seemed fine over the weekend while I was watching over her.”

“I see... Of course. She's a smart young lass.”

Only then did Kim SeokHan relax.

After doing research, it was discovered that the name of the hunter who had rescued her was Shin YuSung. Surprisingly, he was from the Shin-oh family.

‘How intriguing, though. To think that the family would abandon someone skilled enough for the Fist King to take in as his disciple.’

Kim SeokHan began dissecting the situation with his sharp instincts.

If the rumors were true, YuSung was a hunter with an F-rank Trait.

It wasn't hard for the man to imagine the Shin-oh clan that he had met—that placed skill above all else—abandoning the F-rank Trait boy.

The problem lay in the fact that the abandoned boy had been chosen by the Fist King.

‘Shin YuSung... He likely has some sort of talent that only the Fist King could see.’

Kim SeokHan smirked and clicked his tongue.

“In any case, how amusing. Don't you think so, too, Secretary Lee?”

“Hm? What part...”

“The Shin-oh clan pursues strength above all. And yet, they threw away a diamond in the rough. Looks like one shouldn't trust their eyes...”

SuHyun bowed her head to the man's words in lieu of an answer. Like Kim SeokHan had said, it was a critical error of the Shin-oh family, unbecoming the clan.

YuSung, despite being a student, was skilled enough to capture a Rebellion villain.

“...Which is why I've been thinking. Since he saved EunAh and all, we should look into bringing him to our side.”

There were only a few hunters who would refuse the financial sponsorship of the Shinsung group, which was considered to be at the top of Korea's financial world.

But what piqued the man's interest was not YuSung's skills so much as his background.

“What do you think, Secretary Lee?”

SuHyun read between the lines and began to give her own analysis of the situation.

”It’s true... a hunter abandoned by his family is picked up by the reclusive genius, the Fist King, then he becomes stronger—there is no better story out there to claim the favor of the masses.”

“Right. And he would also get the support of his fellow F-rank Trait hunters, as well. Isn’t he the perfect candidate to be marketed as a beacon of hope?”

Kim SeokHan’s business sense truly was top-notch. He was trying to turn the crisis involving his granddaughter into an opportunity.

SuHyun, seeing that, cast her doubts regarding the man aside. No matter how much of a sucker he was for his granddaughter, Kim SeokHan was still the man whose business acumen had raised the Shinsung group to the top of the financial world.

‘...Truly a terrifying individual.’

Her gaze was filled with respect and fear.

Kim SeokHan organized his thoughts.

“Okay, send out the PR team and try to recruit him. Give him a hefty reward for his work in this incident.”

“Oh, er... regarding the reward... the young Miss asked us not to interfere with student Shin Yusung on that matter.”

Kim SeokHan was bewildered by SuHyun’s hurried recounting.

“Hm?! My EunAh requested this? Why?”

“Th-that’s... I think she wanted to handle this matter on her own...”

“...By herself?”

He scrunched up his face in confusion.

‘Personally reward him?’

Knowing his arrogant and lazy granddaughter’s personality, that was impossible.

Even if Kim EunAh was his beloved granddaughter, he could admit that her personality wasn’t anything to write home about.

“She said this... herself? That child?”

“Yes. She told me that she felt very grateful about this incident.”

Kim SeokHan gained a serious expression on his face at those words. It all felt too weird for it to be passed off as nothing. It was obvious that one would express their gratitude if they were helped in some way, but the fact that EunAh was the one trying to do so bugged him.

“...Secretary Lee.”

Kim SeokHan’s voice rang solemnly throughout the room.

“Yes, Mr. President.”

“My EunAh is the successor of the Shinsung group. You know this as well, correct?”

“Yes, I do.”

The rightful heiress of the ShinSung group was Kim EunAh, owing to the fact that the eldest son, Kim JunHyuk, was in a coma.

Kim SeokHan looked at SuHyun with a sincere gaze.

“It’s a very important time in EunAh’s life at her current age... actually, don’t many youths have the same problem of making a big deal out of trivial emotions? That is... Was she showing any symptoms of that?”

It was clear what the man was asking of her. SuHyun, who was quick on the uptake, nervously swallowed and began thinking to herself.

‘Does Kim EunAh like Shin YuSung? How the hell am I supposed to know that...?’

It wasn’t like she didn’t have some idea of what the answer was, considering the emotional reactions EunAh had shown to the messages back at the mansion. If she brought it up to Kim SeokHan right then, though, in that atmosphere, there was no doubt that someone would pay dearly for it.

“From what I’ve seen, it d-definitely wasn’t anything like that.”

Kim SeokHan laughed out loud as if her answer had pleased him.

“Hahaha, true! There’s no way it would happen! My EunAh is a girl of high standards—she grew up watching me, after all!”

SuHyun had a lot she wanted to say in response to that. However, she kept her mouth shut.

‘...Seriously, what is he saying?’

Even so, she understood why the man was so concerned. On one side of the equation was the heiress to the Shinsung group; on the other side was an abandoned orphan.

‘Not... the best-fitting combination, for sure.’

After leaving the bathroom, SuHyun called someone on her Pocket.

– Oh? What’s the occasion?

But SuHyun stuck to only telling the friendly man his mission parameters.

“...Forget that. This is an order from the president. First-year student at Gaon Academy, Shin YuSung... Recruit him.”

She ended the call right after. Kim EunAh's pleas stung, but at the end of the day, the request of the president, Kim SeokHan, took precedence.

\* \* \*

The promised meeting on Monday...

A cool breeze was blowing on the rooftop of the Academy building.

*Woosh—*

EunAh's hair was being tossed to and fro by the wind. She calmly addressed YuSung as the boy arrived at the rooftop.

"So you're here."

—Her usual speech mannerisms. The same carefree expression.

EunAh turned her head to look beyond the chain-link fence down at the sprawling view of the academy grounds.

"You know why I called you out here, right?"

"...Because of what happened during the extracurricular?" YuSung replied.

EunAh turned back to the boy and stared him in the eye; then, she grinned as if pleased by his answer.

"Good, then our talk will be short."

She wore a confident expression on her face.

"I told you back then that I hate owing debts."

"You did."

—YuSung’s composed reply. EunAh walked towards him until they were face-to-face.

“Go on, make your request. I have no intention of negotiating any terms—you saved my brother, after all.”

EunAh’s words were no bluff. She was the heiress of the Shinsung group, the number one financial power in Korea. She had wealth that ordinary people couldn’t even dream of at her fingertips.

“...Hmm.”

However, YuSung made no move to explicitly state his request.

“Really? You’ll do anything?”

He instead asked for confirmation. EunAh, frustrated, grimaced slightly and nodded her head.

“I just told you I would, didn’t I? I’m filthy rich! As soon as I give the word, anything is possible...”

YuSung smiled faintly at those words.

“Okay, then... Join my party.”

EunAh was stunned into silence for three whole seconds after hearing his shocking request.

“Wh-what?” she asked. Her face was frozen in the same expression.

“You heard me right the first time, EunAh. Join my party.”

“Me?! The class president of A Class? Join *your* party?!”

EunAh was speechless.

It was logically impossible to her that someone of her caliber would enter the party of YuSung, an F Class student.

If a person joined a party, it meant that they belonged to the party leader. In other words, YuSung would be acknowledged as being in a higher position than EunAh.

On top of everything, EunAh was second in the student rankings. She was one rank higher than YuSung in that aspect, as well.

“You, that’s... you know what this would mean, right?”

“I do, but I really need you.”

YuSung met the other girl’s eyes, his own full of sincerity. The two were close enough that their noses could touch. Flustered, EunAh stepped back.

“I-I got it. Just back off a bit... W-we’re too close.

She pondered YuSung’s sudden proposal.

‘I-I know I said anything, but... really, joining his party?’

—But only for a moment.

‘This isn’t it’, she thought. EunAh vehemently denied YuSung’s request.

“No way. Ask for something else. I’ll pay as much money as you want...”

“I don’t need money, EunAh. I need a teammate who’s skilled... like you.”

The corner of EunAh’s mouth quirked up at the subtle praise he had given her. Still, her answer didn’t change.

“Why do you want me in your party, anyways? For the International Competition? There’ll be plenty of people who’ll want to participate in it...”



She tried proposing a counterargument.

“Even so, there isn’t anyone out there with as much hidden potential as you, EunAh.”

However, YuSung immediately threw another compliment towards her in response.

“Well, that’s true... but I’m the class president. Becoming a member of another person’s party is a little...”

Much of her enthusiasm had already been curbed.

EunAh, unexpectedly, was the type of person who was weak to compliments. On top of that, she happily accepted the ones that YuSung had given her. That meant that she acknowledged him in some way.

“I don’t have any other requests.”

YuSung laid all of his cards on the table to emphasize his point.

EunAh narrowed her eyes at his determined response.

“...Do you really think I’ll accept an offer like this?”

YuSung gave her a lighthearted smile in reply.

“Yes, I do. Because you always repay your debts, EunAh.”

The girl in question placed her hand to her forehead as if staving off a headache. It’s true. The debt she owed YuSung was enormous. He had not only saved her from Cheat but also saved JunHyuk’s life.

—A savior like no other.

EunAh’s personality made it impossible for her to brush a life debt off and then just go about her merry way.

She pondered over the issue for a while longer, her hand still gripping her forehead.

Eventually, she finished. EunAh looked at YuSung, having to crane her neck up due to the difference in height.

“You... the International competition isn’t the end for you, right? What are your goals for the end of this school year?”

EunAh could tell it was the case—judging by his personality. She knew that he wasn’t the type of person to be satisfied with just that.

She conveyed her seriousness with her face.

“The Tower,” Was YuSung’s short response.

“...The Tower? Up to what floor?’ she asked, incredulous.

The Tower, challenged by the entire world, had its danger level decided by the height of the ‘floor’ in question.

The 1st floor could be cleared easily by even a novice hunter. The 50th floor and onwards, however, was unknown territory that was untouched by even the greatest hunters like the Fist King and the Sword God.

YuSung had already decided on his answer, however. A long time ago, he had made a promise with the Fist King on the topic of conquering the Tower.

[YuSung-ah! Conquer at least up to the 20th floor of the Tower by the end of your first year at Gaon. You need to make headway through it when you’re comparatively less busy. Got it?]

[Yes, Master. I understand.]

The standards that YuSung was taught were, ultimately, the Fist King’s.

“Um... around 20 floors?”

EunAh blanched at his outrageous declaration.

“Tw-twenty floors?! You’re insane! Even an active duty hunter’d die from one mistake at that level!”

She knew that YuSung was an outrageous individual himself, but she didn’t know he was *that* bad until now.

Suddenly tired, EunAh let out a large sigh before turning her head back towards the chain-link fence.

“...Hey.”

She began muttering to the boy in a low voice.

“I’ll do it.”

But immediately after, she shifted to a stern tone and gave YuSung a warning.

“...But only until the International Competition. I’ll only join your party until it ends. Got it?”

It was quite a compromise, considering her prideful attitude. YuSung walked up to EunAh until they were side-to-side, then also looked beyond the fence down below.

The spacious academy grounds were spread out before them. He could see various students living their lives at Gaon in their own ways.

While YuSung’s end goal hadn’t changed since his time at the Martial Spirits’ Mountain, the outside world was different to him. Out there, he could achieve a plethora of goals, but unlike the mountain, YuSung wasn’t alone.

Skill alone wasn’t enough to convince someone or win them over to a person’s side.

‘But this opportunity has given me some time.’

Now it was YuSung’s job to use the time given to him to turn his party members, including Kim EunAh, into genuine comrades.

It was his sole responsibility to learn how to be with others and not just be on his own.

“Okay, that works. Congratulations on joining my party.”

YuSung, after making his decision, held out his hand to seal the deal, and EunAh accepted the handshake without hesitation.



“Oh, and just letting you know. If you ever go soft, I’m out. Got it?”

“...Mhm. Trust in me.”

YuSung smiled good-naturedly while looking down at EunAh.

He gave her the schedule right after.

“Oh, and our party is scheduled to meet up tomorrow.”

“Huh? What do you mean, scheduled?”

“We have a boss subjugation request. All you need to do is be at Academy City by tomorrow with some essentials.”

“Huh?!” was EunAh’s shout of surprise.

But YuSung didn’t care. As long as EunAh was in his party, he planned to squeeze every ounce of manpower he could from her.

EunAH, who had been treated like a princess up to that point due to her status as the heiress to a chaebol group, would be saying goodbye to her glamorous lifestyle during her stint as YuSung’s party member.

# Chapter 53

Sumire's neatly organized bedroom...

Amy gave the place a cursory scan. A 'hmm-' escaped from her lips.

"It's a little modest for a Seven's room, huh. It'd be nice if you brought in a bunch of stuff. The room itself is pretty wide, too~"

Sumire quickly waved her hands at the other girl's words.

"N-no... this is plenty enough for me! There's a TV, a fridge, and the water purifier can dispense ice, and..."

Gaon's dorms were heaven compared to where she had been living in the past when she was young and her family was poor.

"Oh, and there's even hot water! Now that I think about it... I remember being scared the most when I was taking a bath during the winter... I'm really glad I don't have to worry about that here."

Sumire began muttering to herself, a gloomy aura enveloping her body.

Amy, who had lived relatively well-off herself, couldn't even imagine what sort of experiences Sumire had gone through.

"Not even h-hot water? Just what sort of life have you been living up to this point..."

Stuff like 'Use a rubber basin to gather rainwater when your water's cut off because you couldn't pay your bills three months in a row' and 'You can get more money for selling waste paper on rainy days' was life knowledge that Amy would never be in the position to obtain.

"Oh, r-really, it's alright, though! I was very young when it happened,

and it was back in Japan... I haven't skipped any meals since I enrolled in the academy."

"Ohh... I-I see."

Even Amy's aura of optimism couldn't win against Sumire's own pessimistic aura.

"Come to think of it... back when we were living in Okinawa, our house was next to the sea. I could fish there during school breaks; it was nice. Though I'd fall into the sea while I was fishing, and my friends would make fun of me for smelling like fish, but..."

And she kept muttering to herself like so. Amy unconsciously stared at the other girl with sympathy in her eyes.

'...Wh-what's this feeling? It's like, I need to do something for her.'

Only after noticing Amy's piteous gaze did Sumire snap out of it, waving her hands once more in denial.

"Still! I-I'm fine now! Since I became a Seven, I've been getting m-money from the school! Thanks to that, I've been able to send money for living expenses back home! It's a huge relief..."

"...Th-that so? I see. That really is a huge relief."

Amy bashfully nodded her head.

An awkward atmosphere settled between the two. Amy changed the subject in an effort to stir it back up into something more energetic.

"Oh, right! You told me this is the first time you're staying overnight somewhere, right? Hyah, I'm an expert in this area, you know!"

Amy checked each and every item that Sumire had prepared for the trip.

—Cooking devices that ran on mana.



Hygiene products—like her toothbrush. Snacks and food ingredients. Sumire had packed plenty of things.

“Whoa, not bad! Actually, some people go out there with nothing but the clothes on their backs. Considering that, this is plenty!”

“Ah, thank you very much!”

Sumire bowed her head deeply.

Amy grinned. She poked the other girl’s stomach in a teasing manner.

“Aw, cmon, this is nothing between fellow party members... hold on.”

In the middle of her speech, Amy suddenly gained a suspicious expression on her face, as if suddenly recalling something.

“You aren’t going in the same shabby dress you wore back then, are you?” she asked. “There’s no way I’m letting that happen! It’s important for hunters these days to put serious effort into their image!”

“Huh?! Oh, that dress... it’s pretty shabby, isn’t it? It’s a... hand-me-down from my mother.”

Sumire smiled bashfully as if embarrassed by the fact.

Amy turned her gaze away from the other girl, cold sweat dripping down her face.

“H-hm?! D-did I say it was shabby? S-Sorry, I didn’t mean that. I actually meant to say... vintage!”

“...N-no, it’s fine. I never really cared all that much about what clothes I wore before. You don’t have... to force yourself to say that...”

Sumire tried to dispel the awkward atmosphere but only ended up making it worse.

Amy smiled clumsily in response. “Ahaha... r-right! How about this?! I can pick out some clothes for you. That’s fine, right?!”

“...Y-you yourself, Amy-ssi? But clothes are... no matter how much you dress me up, I’m not pretty like you, Amy-ssi...”

Mumble mumble.

Sumire began doing what she always did—trying to find a hole in the ground to hide in. Amy immediately grabbed the girl’s hand in response. She was unwilling to stand for that type of behavior.

“Ugh, it’s fine! Cmon, follow me! I’ll buy ‘em for you!”

“...A-Amy-ssi?”

Sumire’s face turned red as soon as she saw Amy’s hand grip her own.

“Hey, don’t feel embarrassed or anything~ I’ve always wanted to try wearing one of these, but it doesn’t really look good on someone unless they have the body for it! Like you!”

Sumire didn’t yet understand the meaning behind Amy’s words.

\* \* \*

The Academy City branch of the Hunter Association...

A long limousine was parked in front of the cutting-edge facility. YuSung seemed to already be used to the sight because all he thought as he looked at the vehicle was:

‘So she’s arrived.’

As expected, the driver exited the limousine and respectfully opened the car door. Right after, EunAh came out of the vehicle.

“...Hm.”

She stared at YuSung from afar, then began to approach the entrance of the building. Even during her short journey there, her bodyguards covered her with a parasol to protect her from the sun.

It was all rather high-grade. EunAh was being treated like a princess.

As EunAh reached her destination, she dismissed her bodyguards with one wave of her hand. She lowered her sunglasses from her eyes and laughed.

“I got here on time, this time. Would you look at that.”

Sumire’s eyes were wide open.

“Sh-Shin YuSung-ssi? Isn’t that A Class’s...?”

EunAh’s sudden appearance shocked the timid girl. YuSung smiled and began to explain her presence to Sumire.

“Surprised, Sumire? She’s the new party member I was talking about.”

“A Class’s...”

The presence of A Class’s student president in and of itself was enough to intimidate someone.

Sumire grabbed onto YuSung’s clothes—at one point in time, it had become a habit for her. But Sumire hadn’t even come under EunAh’s radar yet.

“Tch, what a nice day. Too bad I’m gonna be doing a dungeon raid instead...”

EunAh finally noticed the other girl and scanned her from top to bottom.

Sumire instinctively shrunk under her gaze. EunAh seemed unimpressed with her.

“.....Just what is she wearing? Are you going on a picnic or something?”



Sumire's clothes were quite daring, quite different from her usual

attire. She wilted at EunAh's comment.

"R-right? These clothes don't fit me... as I thought... I refused them at first, but..."

A dark aura began surrounding Sumire. EunAh was rather bewildered by the response.

"Uh, n-no, that's not what I meant..."

The A Class girl was on record for getting swept up in the perpetually energetic Amy's pace. Sumire was the polar opposite of that but seemed to have a similar effect nonetheless.

Seeing Sumire curl in on herself, EunAh sent a desperate signal to YuSung with her eyes.

'Do something about her!'

He complimented the depressed girl in order to take control of the situation.

"No, Sumire. You look perfectly fine in it."

*Blush—*

Sumire grew quiet. Her face was red.

'Sh-Shin YuSung-ssi called me c-cute...' '

She began to fantasize about it, even tacking on details that hadn't been there before.

Mei Lin, in her cheongsam, took that moment to approach the group aloofly. Her strides were slow and steady.

"I'm Mei Lin, the one in charge of guiding you all," was her monotonous introduction.

EunAh made a face that conveyed her confusion. She seemed to know the woman at some level.

“Isn’t this person... the manager?”

Like EunAh had surmised, the fact that the manager of the Association branch had come down to give them a personal tour was quite unusual.

Mei Lin looked at her with a brusque expression on her face and answered the unspoken question.

“The Association president has asked me to guide student Shin YuSung.”

The Association president. Kang YuChan.

EunAh lazily nodded her head when his name was brought up.

“Oh, my grandfather’s friend. Yeah, I guess the branch manager would have to come out if someone at his level made a request to her.”

Mei Lin’s expression grew even stiffer at the remark.

EunAh was the first 17-year-old Mei Lin had ever encountered who had treated her, one of the most skilled hunters out there, like that.

‘...What a precocious little brat.’

But YuSung was an honored guest of Kang YuChan, and EunAh was the sole granddaughter of the Shinsung group’s president. Mei Lin defaulted to her usual mannerism: hiding her true emotions.

“It is just as you say. I’ll take you all to the portal room now. The usage fee will be waived.”

Mei Lin walked ahead of the group with powerful, confident steps like a model. She casually gave orders to her employees as she passed them by.

“Set the location as A-32. It’s a round trip, so make sure to set your portable coordinate machines as well.”

*Vwoom—*

They approached the blue portal that was making imposing sounds. Mei Lin stopped right in front of the portal and began her explanation about the lake dragon.

“The target is living inside the largest lake on Mount Everline. It can breathe underwater and spends most of its time submerged.”

YuSung interrupted her mid-explanation.

“But doesn’t it always come out of the water when the sun is about to rise?”

Mei Lin laughed, amused at the boy’s answer.

“Correct. Looks like you’ve studied up on the boss monster. Does that mean you also know where it goes after it leaves the water?”

“...A boulder situated near the lake, right?”

YuSung’s prompt reply was correct.

Once the sun began to rise, the lake dragon would lay its body on a giant boulder—this was because its scales had a special property that converted the sun’s rays into energy.

‘Did he learn that on the Martial Spirits’ Mountain? Even so, to think that a student would know about this. How interesting.’

Mei Lin’s face finally relaxed as she softly giggled.

“...Amazing. It’s quite a rare monster as well, so you wouldn’t have been able to find any information on it easily.”

YuSung had already made thorough preparations to defeat the lake

dragon—from bringing hunter gear to preparing a trap.

“Okay, I will now begin the transfer. Please keep in mind, however, that you must return when two days have passed—whether you have succeeded in the hunt or not.”

Mei Lin’s words were as formal as always, but her face betrayed the slightest of goodwill she had towards him. To the manager, a hunter who was well-prepared was always a plus.

“Then I’ll begin the transfer to A-32... I hope that you all succeed.”

As she said those words, the portal began to glow in a blue light.

‘...I’ll show him that I’ve become stronger!’

Sumire reinforced her own resolve, lighting a fire in her passion.

“A rank 4 water element boss? Easy peasy.”

EunAh spoke with a confident expression on her face.

YuSung, the party leader, was calm.

It was the first mission that the Association president Kang YuChan himself had given to him. Failure was not an option.

‘...The subjugation has to go perfectly, without a single mistake.’

The group, after each member made their own resolutions to themselves, entered the portal with the united purpose of defeating the lake dragon.



# Chapter 54

The peak of Mount Everline, with a clear view of the entire mountain...

“Th-this is...” mumbled Sumire, looking down at the greenery lining the sides.

“So that we can get a better idea of where we are, right? Not bad for a starting position.”

EunAh was correct. Setting the mountain peak as the starting location was one of Mei Lin’s considerations.

From their vantage point, they could see three lakes. All three were large, and their depths couldn’t be determined.

“How are we supposed to know which lake has the lake dragon, though?”

—EunAh’s question.

YuSung looked at the lakes one by one before giving his answer.

“That’s why I think the most important thing we need to do is to figure out where the habitat of the lake dragon is.”

“S-so we have to split up?”

Sumire glanced at YuSung. To be honest, she wanted to travel alongside him. But this was an actual job they had to perform, and they were on a time limit.

‘I-I can do it!’

She clenched her fists in determination.

EunAh squinted towards Sumire, then spoke up. She looked annoyed.

“I think it’s that lake over there. The one in the middle.”

It looked like she had some sort of gut feeling about it.

“Th-then I’ll go to the one on the left...”

Sumire chose left.

The only one left was the lake on the right.

YuSung nodded. Right after all party members had selected which lake to inspect, he designated the midway point between the three lakes as their campsite.

“We need to choose a location in advance so that we don’t get lost later... Also, we can use our Pockets to share coordinates and also contact each other, so report to the others immediately when you see the lake dragon.”

Sumire slowly raised her hand after he finished his explanation.

“Then... that means we can walk together until the campsite, right?”

“Mhm.”

She seemed rather happy about the answer.

She and YuSung led the way to the campsite. Meanwhile, EunAh gave a languid yawn and took up the rear.

‘...It’s really humid here. Must be because we’re on a mountain.’

The air quality itself was good, but that wasn’t enough to endear her to Mount Everline. Walking around in the wilderness was an alien experience to her, someone who had always been treated like a

princess—a limousine usually drove her around everywhere, even short distances.

‘...He told me he lived on a mountain for 12 years. Just how did he endure that?’

EunAh looked at YuSung, who was walking in front of her, fascinated. The boy in question wasn’t paying attention to EunAh at all and was instead talking with Sumire.

“Sumire, what did you bring along in your Pocket? They checked your belongings for a good while.”

“Oh! It’s all, uh, cooking devices, utensils, and ingredients. We’ll get hungry sooner or later, so I...”

Sumire laughed bashfully as if embarrassed by the question.

EunAh watched the two converse with each other.

“Hmmm...” ‘They sure do look close to each other... Well, not that it’s any of my business.’

She glanced away from the two for a moment.

At the same time, YuSung was inspecting Sumire’s Pocket with a serious expression on his face.

‘Looks like I won’t have to catch any wild animals,’ he thought.

Delicious food was highly valued by him, someone who had treated food as nothing more than sustenance up to that point.

His culinary skills extended no further than the ability to roast wild game or mushrooms on a fire, so the fact that he was performing the request with Sumire was a huge relief to him.

‘Thank god.’

To YuSung, who had no talent in cooking, Sumire was an incredibly reliable member of his team. The two walked alongside each other, creating a heartwarming atmosphere.

Suddenly, EunAh twitched.

‘...Why does my body feel so itchy?’

She had worn thick, long-sleeved clothes for the excursion. Despite that, something felt wrong. EunAh’s hand began brushing her shoulders; then, face paling, they moved up to her pasty neck.

*Tap.*

“...Huh?”

The thing under her finger had a hard exoskeleton; its many legs squirmed in place in an effort to escape from her hold.

“Hieek!!”

Freaking out, EunAh instinctively flailed her hand away from her body. The identity of the thing that had crawled onto her body was a giant yellow centipede.

“C-centipede! Centipede! Centipede! Guys!! A centipedeeee!!” she cried out. She aimed a barrage of electricity at the insect that had fallen on the ground.

*Bzzt! Boom!*

Suddenly, chaos.

Sumire desperately tried to stop the panicking girl.

“H-hiek! EunAh-ssi! Please calm down for a moment!”

“Eugh! C-centipede! My neck! Crawling! Hieek!”

EunAh's words devolved into meaningless babble.

Her body trembled violently. A girl who normally didn't even flinch in the face of a rank 4 boss monster cowered against a centipede. Insects with many legs were her fear.

*Bzz– Scuttle!!*

The giant centipede, sensing danger, bolted away.

Sumire tried to console her teammate.

“P-please calm down! It's just a regular centipede!”

“How am I supposed to calm down?! Aren't you creeped out by it, too?”

EunAh couldn't stop her heart from pounding out of her chest. In contrast, Sumire's reply was calm.

“D-don't you see them all the time, though?”

She was the picture of nonchalance.

Sumire had grown up seeing all kinds of insects in her life. A centipede was nothing.

“What?! What are you talking about! Where the hell do you see centipedes ‘all the time?’”

EunAh seemed to be disgusted at the prospect, however.

The effect the centipede had on the two girls, who had lived in completely opposite upbringings, was night and day.



“...Ugh, what a huge bug. We gotta finish this mission, quick.”

EunAh rubbed her arms in an effort to settle the chills running up and down her body. Right then, YuSung stopped walking.

“Let’s designate this as our campsite.”

*Woosh.*

—Flat land with slight winds.

The campsite that YuSung had chosen seemed quite suited for the purpose.

“I’ll be doing the preparations, then...!”

Sumire carefully took her ring and a lock of YuSung’s hair out of her Pocket. It seemed like she was going to leave the work of setting up camp to her undead.

EunAh lowered the zipper on her jacket and took it off, then hung it up on a tree near the campsite. She then turned towards her designated lake.

“I’m gonna head off now, alright? I’m getting a good feeling about it.”

With rarely-seen enthusiasm on her face, EunAh took heavy strides towards the lake.

\* \* \*

The meeting room of the Association’s Academy City branch...

Mei Lin, its manager, was receiving and going over various details related to her work in the middle of the room—signifying her place as the one in charge.

“Manager, the A-11 portal has been cleared.”

“...Good thing we sent in those rank 5 hunters. Did anything out of the ordinary come up?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Good. Next.”

She kept the meeting running smoothly. The reason why someone as relatively young as her was assigned to be in charge of Academy City was due to her ability to efficiently handle her work.

Right when the meeting was about to wrap up, one of the attendees carefully raised their hand up.

“Er... nothing’s for certain yet, but I do have some info to give you about A-32. The portal that the students entered earlier today.”

Mei Lin’s expressionless eyes narrowed. “What do you mean, nothing’s for certain?”

The speaker displayed a document on a hologram.

“These are the results we’ve gotten after inspecting the soil on Mount Everline... there are residual elements from the lake dragon’s scales that don’t match up.”

“...Isn’t it obvious that any scale samples picked up from the ground will have some degree of contamination to them?”

The speaker began to sweat nervously at her question.

“I-it’s too big of a difference to dismiss it as just that. We think that... the lake dragon that will appear in that area has a high chance of being a subspecies.”

“...A subspecies, huh.”

Mei Lin glanced towards the researcher next to the speaker, asking for their opinion. The researcher fiddled with their glasses, then adamantly shook their head.

“The chance of a subspecies of the lake dragon appearing is a mere 0.03%. Considering the margin of error present in our current investigation, you could say it’s even lower.”



“B-but still, you can’t know for sure, right? We sent some students to take care of the dungeon... what if it actually happens to be a subspecies?”

—Opposing factions between the researcher and the speaker.

Mei Lin carefully read through what was projected on the hologram. Shin YuSung, Kim EunAh, and Sumire were the ones who had entered the A-32 portal.

‘...A subspecies.’

The woman let out a small laugh as she recalled YuSung and the prowess that she had witnessed.

“It’s alright. Let the raid commence as usual. The manpower we sent into A-32 should be enough to handle it, even if a subspecies were to appear.”

She stood up from her seat at those words, bringing the conversation to an end. Her ability to pick things up quickly was one of her greatest assets that helped her gain her current position.

Thanks to it, the skill that Mei Lin was most confident in was her ability to determine someone’s worth.

‘Subspecies or not, he isn’t a student who would lose to the likes of a rank 4 boss.’

And the manager of Academy City valued Shin YuSung higher than anyone else.

\* \* \*

The dense forest of Mount Everline...

The sunlight seeping through the leaves bathed the view in a mesmerizing green. EunAh was fascinated.

“...Oh, damn. It really feels like something’s gonna appear.”

The air grew more and more chilly as she traveled deeper into the forest, towards the lake. EunAh took the time to talk to herself.

“...Why is it so gloomy in here?”

*–Gehhhhh!*

Right then, an unfamiliar sound, resembling a whale’s cry, rang out from the direction of the lake throughout the forest. EunAh, surprised, instinctively crouched.

‘I-is this actually...?’

She slowly approached the location where the sound was originating from. If what she was thinking about was correct, then her hunch really would be scarily on the nose.

*Peek.*

EunAh carefully peeked her head out over a bush. The first thing that reached her eyes was the humongous lake that she had seen earlier. Right after, she saw a massive creature near the lake, ripping an unidentifiable hunk of meat into shreds.

“Chomp! Crunch!”

Massive teeth...

A body covered in yellow scales...

Shaped like a mix between a lizard and a snake...

‘It’s the lake dragon!’

EunAh immediately recognized what the monster was.

‘No wonder I was getting vibes from this place earlier!’

Whether it was due to fate or coincidence, EunAh's instincts were as sharp as ever—especially considering the fact that the lake dragon only rarely hunted above land. The sight of it tearing apart its meal outside of the water was rather rare to see.

EunAh also didn't know this, but lake dragons were originally supposed to have blue scales, not yellow. Thus, she had found the lake dragon subspecies, hitting the 0.03% chance.

EunAh sent off a message to Sumire, too flustered to clean up any typos she made along the way.

**[KimSilverA: BGI NWES! Big news! Lake dragon wheer i am!]**

[すみれ: ㄸ`ㅇ´? !!]

[すみれ: ㅇ/❁◻◻\>]

Sumire's replies were entirely made up of Japanese letters and emoticons. EunAh placed a hand on her forehead and sighed.

“...She's coming over, right?” she muttered.

Next was YuSung's turn.

EunAh focused on sending another message to the boy, but only for a moment.

“Grr... rrr...”

Her fingers paused in her frantic typing as she heard a certain sound right next to her ear.

“Grr...”

She could see hot puffs of something's breath out of the corner of her vision.

“...Well, no helping it, then.”

EunAh laughed as if finding the situation she was in absurd. Lightning crackled in her palms.

“I’ll just have to beat you myself.”

*Bzzt!*

EunAh spun her body around to face the lake dragon.

The monster bared its fangs and confronted her.

“...Krrk.”

—The ruler of Mount Everline, a subspecies of the rank 4 boss, the lake dragon.

...Versus 2nd place in Gaon Academy’s student rankings.

The two glared at each other.

“...You’ve got a lot of nerve baring your teeth at me, water lizard.”

It was the wilderness, where only the law of the jungle applied. The strong survived, and the weak died.

All that mattered to them was determining who the stronger of the two was.

# Chapter 55

EunAh had always been a lucky person.

Ever since she had been born, she had been a part of the Shinsung group, one of the largest corporations in the financial world. She was also born with an electricity Trait with one of the highest growth potentials in Korea.

Even trivial things would activate her luck right when she'd least expect it—for example, if her snack had a chance to come with a free prize, she would win it.

But her luck didn't necessarily always fall in her favor.

“Are you freaking kidding me...”

—The boss of Mount Everline's lake.

The chances of the lake dragon being a subspecies of its kind was a mere 0.03%, but EunAh had just happened to meet said rare subspecies.

And on top of that, the specific subspecies of lake dragon just so happened to have a resistance to electricity. What were the chances of that?

Whatever it was, EunAh had managed to beat the odds.

“Out of everything you could've been, why are you the lightning element?!”

“Groaaar!!”

The dragon roared, its rage ringing outwards as a sharp cry.

EunAh tried to attack the monster again with her electricity, but it had no effect.

*Bzzt! Zzt!*

The lake dragon's golden scales completely absorbed her electrical attack. It was not an opponent that her Trait was going to work against.

*Boom! Bam!*

Every time the dragon's massive foot slammed down on the ground, electricity would appear from its claws, crackling and dispersing everywhere.

“...Keuk!”

To a hunter who relied solely on their Trait, meeting a monster who had resistance against whatever element their Trait utilized was a death sentence.

EunAh screamed and began to run back from where she came from.

“Aaaah! This is! So annoyinggggg!!”

“Kwohhh!”

*Boom boom boom boom!*

The lake dragon pursued her with great speed, both legs leaving deep gouges into the soil.

*Swipe!*

EunAh quickly ducked as she heard the ominous sound of claws swiping the air behind her.

*Whoosh!*

Just as she had predicted, the dragon's clawed foot struck the air right above her head.

EunAh's fighting capabilities were around the same as an ordinary high school girl's at that moment.

"Shit! If my Trait would just hit through, I'd be able to take care of that lizard!!"

*Swipe!*

The dragon made another attack with its leg. EunAh, abandoning her dignity, rolled on the ground to dodge it.

"Huff! Haak-! Puff!"

She crawled around on all fours to gain speed, then gradually stood back up on her legs without breaking stride. It was a sorry sight.

"Tch!"

Like so, EunAh did whatever she could to run towards the forest.

"Eu-EunAh-ssi?!"

Sumire, who had just arrived, shouted in surprise as she saw the other girl running towards her.

"Hey, hey, hey! I'm gonna die! Save me!!"

EunAh was emotionally and mentally in tatters. Seeing her, the Japanese girl aimed a level gaze towards the lake dragon, then aimed her finger towards it.

"Death Knight-ssi! I'm leaving it to you!"

"As... my... master... wishes!"

*Wham!*

The death knight was crushed under the lake dragon's massive foot.

"Hieeek!" Sumire shrieked.

Even in its precarious position, the death knight put its master's concerns over its own.

"Mas... ter! Please run!"

"Death Knight-ssi—!"

Truly, a scene from a soap opera that was sure to make you cry.

EunAh grabbed her sobbing party member and ran full tilt towards the forest.

"Come on! Why are you just standing there?!"

"B-but, Death Knight-ssi!"

"It's fine. It's already dead!"

As soon as they reached the trees, EunAh hid herself and Sumire amongst the foliage.

The lake dragon began to roar, still at a distance.

"Groaaaar—!"

*Boom boom boom.*

Then it began heading back to the lake.

The lake dragon subspecies seemed to be well above the level of a rank 4 boss monster. In fact, it seemed to be more comparable to a rank 5 boss—quite a bit more dangerous.

"...Haah, I really thought I was gonna die there."



EunAh sighed in relief, looking and feeling like a complete wreck. The fact that the lake dragon was absorbing her electricity in and of itself made it harder for her to get away from it. It truly was a close call.

*Glance.*

Sumire, who had been watching her teammate out of the corner of her eye, carefully spoke up.

“U-um... a-are you alright? There’s blood on your thigh...”

There was a light scratch on EunAh’s thigh. She had probably gotten it from a stray twig on the ground when she was rolling around on it.

“...Guess I got scratched.”

“It needs to be treated quickly, then...”

EunAh turned away from Sumire’s worried gaze.

“It’s fine, nothing you need to make a fuss about. I’ll just get it healed when we go back.”

“N-no, you can’t!”

Right when EunAh was about to get up from her seat, Sumire grabbed her arm.

“Huh?”

“N-no matter how small a wound is, it needs to be disinfected before any bacteria get inside!”

The usually passive Sumire was speaking up. Flustered, EunAh could do nothing but get swept up in the other girl’s pace.

“I mean, th-that’s true, but... It’ll be fine... I just need to get the nanomachine treatment later.”

“...That’s no good, though. You’ll be in a lot of pain until you get treated.”

Sumire looked up at EunAh, insistent on helping her. The A Class girl gave in and plopped right back down onto the ground.

“I’m telling you, it’s nothing...” EunAh grumbled.

Even as her teammate was complaining, Sumire took out a first-aid kit with a serious gaze in her eyes.

“Th-the first thing we need to do is disinfect the wound area with an alcohol-soaked cotton ball!”

“Euk! Eugh... Ack!”

EunAh gave off a light shriek as the cotton ball touched her wound.

“St-stop! Hey, this stings a lot!”

“B-but it needs to be disinfected. It’s important.”

Sumire admonished her teammate, a determined expression on her face.

She squeezed out some ointment on a fresh cotton ball and began to dab the wound with it.

“Heal smoothly... new skin...”

And as a finishing touch, Sumire recited some sort of spell as she covered the wound with a band-aid.

“What the hell are you doing?!”

EunAh’s face was dyed completely red.

“S-sorry! It’s just a habit I have with my younger siblings...”

“Stop it! A-am I a little kid to you?!”

But even as she was yelling, EunAh’s eyes were staring at the band-aid on her leg. Sumire’s first-aid work was meticulous.

But the F Class girl’s shoulders had slumped due to that one statement.

*Glance.*

EunAh eyed her teammate as if bothered by her reaction.

“...Th-thanks.”

So—with a hesitant voice—EunAh showed her gratitude.

She locked eyes with Sumire, who looked genuinely touched. Her mouth was hanging wide open, and her expression looked dazed.

EunAh quickly rose up again and stared down at the other girl.

“What are you doing? I think we’re done for today. Let’s head back.’

Sumire nodded her head, showing that she understood.

\* \* \*

“Huu huu... someone like EunAh-ssi told something like me that she’s grateful...”

Sumire kept muttering under her breath on the way back to their campsite. She giggled ominously at the memory.

“Hey, stop muttering to yourself! I mean it! It’s creepy! Please!”

EunAh was thoroughly freaked out by the other girl’s behavior, but as the path began to narrow, she had no choice but to stick close to her.

“A-and you smell... R-really g-good, too. Huhu...”

“...Egh.”

Sumire’s gloomy atmosphere was thick enough to put a lid on even EunAh’s mouth.

\* \* \*

No matter how much he searched the lake that he had chosen, YuSung couldn’t find even a hint of the lake dragon anywhere.

‘...It’s not here. Looks like the dragon is at another lake.’

It wasn’t a huge deal even if they hadn’t determined the dragon’s exact location, seeing that there was plenty of time between then and the morning, when the monster was supposed to emerge from its habitat. Of course, the dragon also hunted on land during late afternoons, but that was a rare enough occasion that YuSung wasn’t counting on it.

He ended up using the rest of his allocated time to inspect the surroundings.

‘There are a lot of good herbs here... Must be due to a lack of human presence.’

YuSung had learned the name and uses of countless herbs while he was living on the mountain. After all, learning the attributes of all the flora and fauna in the wild was a key survival skill.

He picked a few of the herbs and placed them in his Pocket.

‘Some viscous herb and steerus. This much should be enough, right?’

The viscous herb’s sap was as sticky as its name suggested, and if one ground the steerus plant with a stone, they would be able to produce grey-colored sap.

YuSung stood up from where he was and stretched his back.

Aside from medicinal herbs, there were also many herbs or vegetables in the area that one could eat if they were hungry. However, YuSung did not give those plants a single glance.

‘...Yeah, this is fine. I won’t need any other herbs.’

He was no longer the boy who was satisfied with subsisting off of mountain vegetables and wild game. His palate had become more refined between eating both Sumire’s cooking and bombastic delivery food.

He had never enjoyed the benefits of ‘flavor’ up until then.

‘Time to head back. Sumire said that she’ll be cooking tonight, didn’t she?’

YuSung was highly looking forward to the girl’s cooking, even if he didn’t show it on the outside.

*Ring!*



Just then, his Pocket began to ring.

[KimSilverA: Lake dragon. Where I was inspecting. It was eating.]

A succinct message from EunAh.

The chances of the lake dragon being outside of its habitat and eating its meal was quite rare. Considering that, it was a great opportunity for the party.

On top of that, the lake dragon was weak to electricity attacks—as long as it wasn't some sort of offshoot species. That was why YuSung immediately assumed that EunAh had defeated the dragon.

‘She’s so lucky.’

YuSung fiddled with his Pocket to send a reply back to the A Class girl.

**[Shin YuSung: Did you get it?]**

Suddenly, silence.

EunAh was not replying.

*Ring!*

In fact, the next person to send a message to him was Sumire.

Hers was nothing but a simple emote.

**[すみれ: ´π π `...]**

With that, he could draw a pretty good picture of what was going on in his head. YuSung smiled the tiniest bit as he replied to the girl.

**[Shin YuSung: I'll be there]**

Even if the girls had failed to catch the dragon, they had still managed to determine its habitat. As he had expected, there were more advantages to hunting a monster with his party members than doing it solo.

And the stronger one got, the starker the difference became between a hunter with good comrades and those without.

Even the Fist King had the Sword God and the Witch as his comrades when he was scaling the Tower, and he was the kind of man who always pursued solitude. The importance of teammates was quite palpable in that sense.

‘...I was really lucky, now that I think about it.’

Even if he was the one to offer them help in the first place, having Sumire—with her incredible potential despite having an F-rank trait—and Eunah—who was second in the student ranking—as his comrades was a stroke of incredible fortune.

*Step step.*

YuSung began heading back to the campsite. For a brief moment, he craned his neck up towards the sky. He could see countless stars shining up there, despite the fact that the sun hadn’t completely set yet.

People changed as they met other people. Whether the change was positive or negative was of no consequence. When you interact with someone, their influence seeps into you, and yours seeps into them.

And YuSung knew more than anyone just how important meeting other people was. How could he not, after changing so drastically under the tutelage of his master?

‘I should go on back to the campsite.’

After completing his musings, YuSung lightly smiled and pressed onwards. His steps were quicker than before.



# Chapter 56

An expertly-lit campfire...

EunAh was sitting next to the fire, cheeks puffed up. She seemed to be miffed about the fact that she had to let the lake dragon go. Sumire was sitting next to YuSung and was glancing intermittently at the boy, grinning creepily all the while.

‘Sh-shin YuSung-ssi is sitting next to me... ’

EunAh, meanwhile, was giving her reason as to why she had lost against the boss monster.

“...Hey, the lake dragon that appeared was some sort of subspecies, and... it was a lightning element on top of that.”

YuSung finally understood why EunAh had failed to capture the dragon. The situation was even unluckier than he thought it could be.

He tended the flames while nodding along to her story at the same time.

“So you couldn’t really do anything.”

In fact, the situation that EunAh was in was a consequence of being one of those hunters that the Fist King had labeled as ‘hunters these days who rely on their Traits’.

YuSung himself was raised to use his outstanding physical characteristics as the basis for his master’s techniques. Due to this, he could exhibit incredible combat prowess even without using his Trait.

“Don’t feel so down about it, though. You found the lake dragon’s habitat, didn’t you?”

“R-right! And we have Shin YuSung-ssi with us now, so W-we’ll definitely be able to...”

EunAh, at Sumire’s words of comfort, glanced down at the bandage on her leg, then her expression relaxed, and she let out a breath.

“...Leave it. I’m fine now.”

She still seemed to be bothered by it, though. Not surprising, considering the fact that she kept running into situations where her Trait had been useless—first, the Silver Beak, and then the lake dragon subspecies.

“Tch...”

EunAh, frustrated, lowered her head back towards the campfire.

“S-still, I’m sure you’ll feel a bit better after eating some tasty food!”

Sumire took various cooking utensils, devices, and ingredients out of her Pocket.

YuSung looked at Sumire, reacting to the mention of food.

“Is there anything I can help you with?” he asked, wanting the meal to be prepared as quickly as possible. Sumire blushed at the suggestion.

“Oh, th-then...! Can you please chop the vegetables?”

“Of course.”

Sumire bit her lip to stop a smile from reaching her face as YuSung began helping her side by side.

‘I-I’m... cooking... with Shin YuSung-ssi!’

A man and a woman cooking dinner together?

Sumire placed the pot over the campfire. Meanwhile, her delusions

were growing.

“Hu, huhu! Huhu...”

Her delusions had already gone past dinner. She was cooking breakfast for YuSung at the moment.

EunAh, used to being treated like a princess, killed time surfing the internet on her Pocket instead of helping the two out.

Though, that only lasted for a moment. She put her Pocket away soon after and instead watched YuSung and Sumire cook, leaning her chin on her hand.

“I-I have to coat the bottom of the pot with butter... then stir the onions until they’re brown...”

“Okay, how about I stir the onions for you?”

“Oh, th-thank you! Then, I’ll prepare the other ingredients...”

The two seemed to be having fun. EunAh’s eyes narrowed.

‘...Guess they’re enjoying themselves.’

She felt slightly left out at those words.

EunAh had never done anything with other people in her life before. No one had ever dared to ask or tell her to do anything, after all.

Even so, as she watched them cook, an odd feeling began to stir up in her chest.

“Next, you have to stir-fry the meat, as well, then you pour in the water, then the chicken stock and curry roux...”

Sumire was pouring all kinds of ingredients into the pot. EunAh chose that moment to approach her.

“Hey, uh... isn’t there anything I can do? It’s kind of boring doing nothing all by myself.”

She glanced towards the curry as she spoke, trying to throw the girl a hint. Sumire stared at her, dazed.

“EunAh-ssi... w-wants to help with cooking?”

“...What’s so fascinating about it?”

“But the rumors...”

“What about ‘em?”

Seeing the peculiar light in EunAh’s eyes, Sumire didn’t continue the train of thought, but if one thing was certain, it was that the girl in front of her was changing, bit by bit.

All three members of the party pitched in to finish the curry.

Sumire poured YuSung’s share into a white bowl.

“This is your share, Shin YuSung-ssi... oh, a-and! I made some rice and karaage at home!”

She took out some expertly-fried chicken karaage from her food storage kit—It was a recipe she had devised over many, many grueling attempts in order to take revenge against the delivery fried chicken.

“I-it goes well with... the curry, if you eat them together.”

Sumire carefully placed the karaage on his curry.

YuSung scooped up some curry with his spoon.

Sumire was staring at the spoonful of curry as if she had entered the dish for a competition.

*Munch munch.*

Every time YuSung's mouth moved, Sumire nodded. Her expression was deathly serious.

*Gulp.*

The moment of truth... YuSung had swallowed the curry.

"This is..."

Sumire gulped as the boy began to give his verdict. In fact, the curry recipe was also something she had prepared for her chance of victory.

YuSung grinned at the other girl's dazed expression.

"Really good."

—A few simple words from YuSung.

But Sumire's face was almost completely covered in red from them.

"Th-then! Is my karaage... better than the chicken you had a few days ago, Shin YuSung-ssi?"

The defeat of her lunchbox had been weighing on her that entire time. No, that moment had turned into a traumatic experience for her.

"Hm..."

YuSung thought hard about his answer, then opened his mouth to give his honest opinion.

"I think, if you combine this chicken with the curry, this is more delicious than the chicken I had before, but if you compare just the chicken with each other... the delivery chicken is just a teensy, tiny bit more delicious..."

He laughed in an apologetic manner.

Sumire was as still as a statue. She had completely frozen up at his

response. It seemed like the intense flavors of the delivery chicken had a stronger impact on YuSung than her own karaage.

“D-d... delivery chicken. I-I suppose so... it was... delicious. It really was...”

All she could do was forcibly laugh through the tears beginning to well up in her eyes.

EunAh, watching the reactions of her teammates, picked up her own spoonful of curry with a blank expression on her face.

‘...Well, it should be edible, at least. I’m pretty hungry.’

As a member of the ShinSung group family, EunAh had grown up eating all sorts of delicacies. She didn’t have any high hopes for Sumire’s curry.

*Nom.*

\* \* \*

But her eyes widened as she placed the spoon in her mouth.

‘...Huh?’

It was the most delicious curry that EunAh had ever tasted.

‘What the hell.’

*Glance.*

EunAh side-eyed her party leader. Just how could he compare the sumptuous taste of the homemade karaage to chicken bought from a restaurant? The deep, rich curry perfectly complemented the spicy, fried meat as well.

As she bit into the fried chicken, its juices leaked out and mixed with the flavor of the curry that had seeped into the batter.

To EunAh, Sumire's curry was heaven in a bowl.

'Th-this is... incredibly delicious.'

She scooped another spoonful of the curry without thinking, but Sumire chose that moment to engage with her.

"Wh-what do you think, EunAh-ssi? I bet it isn't very good... you're rich, after all. You must be used to eating better food than this..."

EunAh twitched at the other girl's defeated tone. Even she couldn't believe the fact that she had fallen in love with the unsophisticated dish when she had lived her life tasting fine cuisine from all around the world.

She was unwilling to put down Sumire's dish just for the sake of her own pride.

"...It-it's good. Totally edible."

She coughed out of embarrassment right after, but EunAh acknowledged the dish.

Then it was Sumire's turn for her eyes to grow wide.

"R-really?!"



EunAh nodded in lieu of a verbal answer.

To her, the curry wasn't special just because it was delicious. She wasn't sure why but eating it warmed something in her heart.



*Nom.*

EunAh placed the spoon in her mouth once again. She looked first at Sumire, then to YuSung.

‘...A party, huh.’

At some point in her life, EunAh had begun distancing herself from others, constructing a wall between her and them. She wasn’t always like that, when she thought about it.

[Haha, Miss EunAh, I hope you put in a good word for me to the president!]

[EunAh, do you wanna join our group? I bet it must be embarrassing to mingle with the common folk.]

The people who approached her never looked at her, EunAh, but only at what surrounded her.

[She’s just lucky.]

[She’s not even that amazing on her own, right? She was born into a rich house, and she was born with a strong Trait.]

[The only thing she’s good at is running to her father for help. I bet she hasn’t put a single ounce of effort into anything.]

—Insulting her behind her back.

[Do you have time today? I have something I want to talk to you about.]

[So about that proposition I gave you earlier.]

—Approaching her while pretending to be friendly.

—People kept hurting her.

And maybe she had grown tired of being hurt. When her brother had fallen into a coma, showing weakness had ceased to become an option for her.

She wouldn't get hurt if she didn't approach people and didn't try to open up to them.

So EunAh gave up.

But something was different that day. EunAh had joined a party, had traveled with them, had her wounds patched up by them, and had eaten dinner with them.

She would have normally dismissed such activities as childish and annoying, but they weren't all that bad.

'Well... I think I can put up with this until the International Competition.'

Before she had any inkling of it, EunAh's feelings towards a normal lifestyle were gradually changing.

YuSung smiled as he watched the girl, who was lost in her own thoughts.

He knew that even a small event could be the start of a life-changing process.

\* \* \*

Time passed until the night grew darker and darker. YuSung walked towards the piece of flat land they had found earlier and stopped.

"I'll place the tent here. No objections, right?"

"Y-yes!" Sumire fiercely nodded her head.

YuSung took out the tent from his Pocket.

*Voom!*

With one touch, the tent rather efficiently set itself up. Sumire and YuSung both began taking out various items and placing them in the tent.

EunAh watched the two with a bemused expression on her face.

“What? Where’s my tent?”

Her logic dictated that everyone should have their own tent. That was an obvious fact to her.

However, YuSung’s answer to her question was calm and completely contradicted EunAh’s thoughts.

“This is a four-person tent.”

He had only prepared one tent for the excursion.

# Chapter 57

“Whaaaat?!!”

EunAh’s scream rang throughout the forest. The shock made her flail all over the place.

“Hey! Y-you said you’d prepare the tents! Why did you only bring one?!”

In contrast, YuSung was calm.

“This is a four-person tent. It’s plenty big.”

“Wh-who said anything about the size?! If there’s one tent... th-that means we have to all sleep together!” she spat out.

“Is there something weird about that?”

But YuSung seemed to be genuinely surprised at her reaction. Why would many tents be better than one tent? It made no sense to the boy who had grown up on the Martial Spirits’ Mountain his entire life.

“Of course there is! It’s super weird! H-how is a girl... s-supposed to sleep with a guy in the same place?!”

“...But tactically, it’s more advantageous for all of us to stay together in the case of an ambush.”

“Who cares about that crap!”

“Just why are you so against the idea, anyways?” he asked innocently.

EunAh, eyes set in a death glare, slowly grew red at his question.

“Th-that’s because... y-you might do something... w-weird...”

Her voice had lowered to an ashamed whisper by the end of the sentence. Her head was bowed down.

Sumire, who had been next to her, suddenly stood up.

“You’re wrong! Sh-Shin YuSung-ssi would never do something like that!” she shouted rather courageously.

EunAh turned her face towards her and made a face.

“...Huh?”

“H-hiek!”

—And so ended Sumire’s meager opposition.

EunAh glanced at the boy inside the tent with a distrustful gaze.

‘Even if he knows so little about women... ’

Of course, like Sumire, EunAh also trusted YuSung to a certain extent.

‘Well... he really isn’t the sort of person to do anything like that, but still... ’

She was rather staunch on this topic, however. The tent was a completely sealed environment, small enough that the occupants could hear each other breathe. What would happen if their bodies happened to touch in that space?

‘C-crazy!’

Just thinking about it made the blood rush to EunAh’s ears.

“N-no way! I keep thinking about it, but I just can’t accept it!”

YuSung fell into deep thought as she retained her stubborn attitude. Eventually, he made a decision and stood up from his spot.

“There’s no helping it, then. I’ll sleep outside,” he calmly declared.

EunAh was flabbergasted.

“Hey! D-don’t do that. Just wait a moment! There’s gotta be...”

“Don’t worry. I’m used to sleeping out in the wilderness.”

Sumire shook her head violently at his response. “Ah... b-but Shin YuSung-ssi, you’re the one who brought this tent...”

She aimed her tearful gaze towards EunAh, who immediately felt guilty about the whole situation. The A Class girl sighed.

“...Ugh, fine. I’ll sleep in here, okay? I’ll do it! I’ll sleep!”

Keeping her distance from YuSung, EunAh climbed into the tent and began to hesitantly unpack her belongings.

Not too far into in, however, she looked between YuSung and Sumire with a somewhat concerned expression on her face. Her extraordinary instincts were telling her that the two of them were dangerous in some way.

“...Hold it. I’ll sleep in the middle spot.”

Something dangerous would happen if the two were to sleep next to each other. Of course, there was no basis for this gut feeling—it was purely her instincts.

“Sure.”

YuSung agreed to her proposal without any fuss and moved his own belongings to the corner.

At the same time, Sumire had summoned a death knight to stand

guard outside of the camp.

“D-Death Knight-ssi! I’m counting on you tonight, as well.”

“I will obey you, Master... even if... I die.”

EunAh shook her head at the display.

“...Tch, didn’t you already die for her earlier?”

With that, their preparations were completed. It was still too early in the evening for them to sleep, however. YuSung slowly climbed out of the tent.

“We’re finished setting up, right? I’ll be off somewhere by myself for a bit.”

Sumire answered him enthusiastically. “G-got it!”

She had an idea of what the boy was going off to do.

‘...He’s training, isn’t he?’

Back during the theme park test, as well, she had seen him leave the hotel around this time of the day to train. She thought he was incredible for doing so.

To YuSung, training had become an inextricable part of his existence. Sumire couldn’t imagine just how grueling his life had been for it to get to this point.

‘Sh-Shin YuSung-ssi... really is... amazing. Absolutely amazing.’ She smiled, pleased.

In comparison, EunAh let out an appreciative sigh as he left the campsite.

“Phew, good thing he’s gone.”

She immediately began to strip her clothes off—first, her jacket, then even the t-shirt she was wearing underneath it. Sumire's eyes grew wide.

“...Eu-EunAh-ssi?”

“What? Never seen someone change their clothes before?”

She had taken out a cute pair of killer whale-embroidered pajamas.

EunAh always enjoyed teatime at 6 PM every day and changed into pajamas before sleeping if she could help it. She was a much more delicate girl than she seemed.

‘...A-adorable,’ Sumire thought, though she couldn’t voice the opinion aloud. She was staring at the pajama-clad girl.

“What are you looking at me so intently for?”

“Huh? Oh, n-nothing! I just thought they suited you really well.”

Sumire also changed into her skull-patterned pajamas. EunAh took that time to crawl up to the entrance of the tent.

*Thump.*

There, she sat cross-legged at the mouth of the tent and looked up at the moon in a daze.

“The air’s really nice.”

Sumire gave a little smile at the other girl’s non-sequitur. She crawled up next to EunAh and sat down.

“It is. The moon is really bright, as well.”

EunAh snorted.

*Pat.*



She stretched out her arms behind her to support her weight. Then, suddenly, she struck up a conversation with Sumire.

“So what made you come all the way here from Japan?” she asked.

“Oh, th-that’s because...”

Sumire opened her mouth to speak, then closed it. EuAh let out a languid yawn.

“...Yawwwwn. S’fine. I just threw the question out there. No need to answer it if you’re uncomfortable talking about it.”

“That’s... a-actually, I made a mistake, and my whole class got hurt because of it.”

\* \* \*

“Because of you?” EunAh asked, as if she couldn’t believe the other girl. Sumire confirmed the truth of her statement with a nod, a bitter expression on her face.

“Our whole class went on an excursion together to a dungeon. My abilities... ran wild there.”

It had happened a year before she had come to Korea.

Sumire was controlling the undead with her powers, but they had suddenly spun wildly out of her control. It had been a distressing accident for her.

The reason why that happened was simple—it was because Sumire had gotten too greedy and had done something that exceeded the boundaries of her abilities.

Her desire to show just what she was capable of in the undead-themed dungeon was palpable. The results, however, had been gruesome. Her Trait had called all of the undead in the dungeon to her, but she couldn’t control them.

By the time the Association hunters had arrived at the scene, Sumire was the only person there who was unharmed.

It was unknown what the reason was, but the undead were carefully protecting the unconscious Sumire.

30 people were injured, including the teacher in charge. Thankfully, no one had died, but Sumire quickly turned gloomy after the incident.

Her words, which were already few, grew even fewer. Everyone in her school either shunned her or was afraid of her

“E-everyone in my class... avoided me. I understand why. No one would like someone who hurt them...”

For someone with a fragile personality like Sumire, it was impossible for her to continue to stay in Japan after everything.

“...So I ran away.”

She didn't have the courage to try and mend the relationships she had with them, so she ran away. Sumire smiled bitterly as she recounted her tale.

“...I see.”

EunAh's response was calm.

Sumire, who was looking at the other girl, suddenly widened her eyes.

“Um, Eu-EunAh-ssi?”

EunAh turned her head to look at Sumire. The Japanese girl pointed at her shoulder and carefully said:

“Th-there's a centipede on your shoulder...”

She checked her shoulder.

“Kyaaaak!!”

EunAh was in tears and running away.

Sumire laughed and disposed of the centipede for her.

The two girls were slowly growing closer and closer together.

\* \* \*

The dark, shadowed forest...

YuSung looked up at the moon in the sky and took his stance. He channeled his mana, starting from deep within his body and gradually spreading outwards to the rest of it.

*Woosh!*

A single gust of wind from the first shook the trees and made the blades of grass dance along the ground.

YuSung began maintaining a slow, steady breath.

Then, he waited... Until it was time for his mana to burst forth.

‘Now.’

And he let it explode.

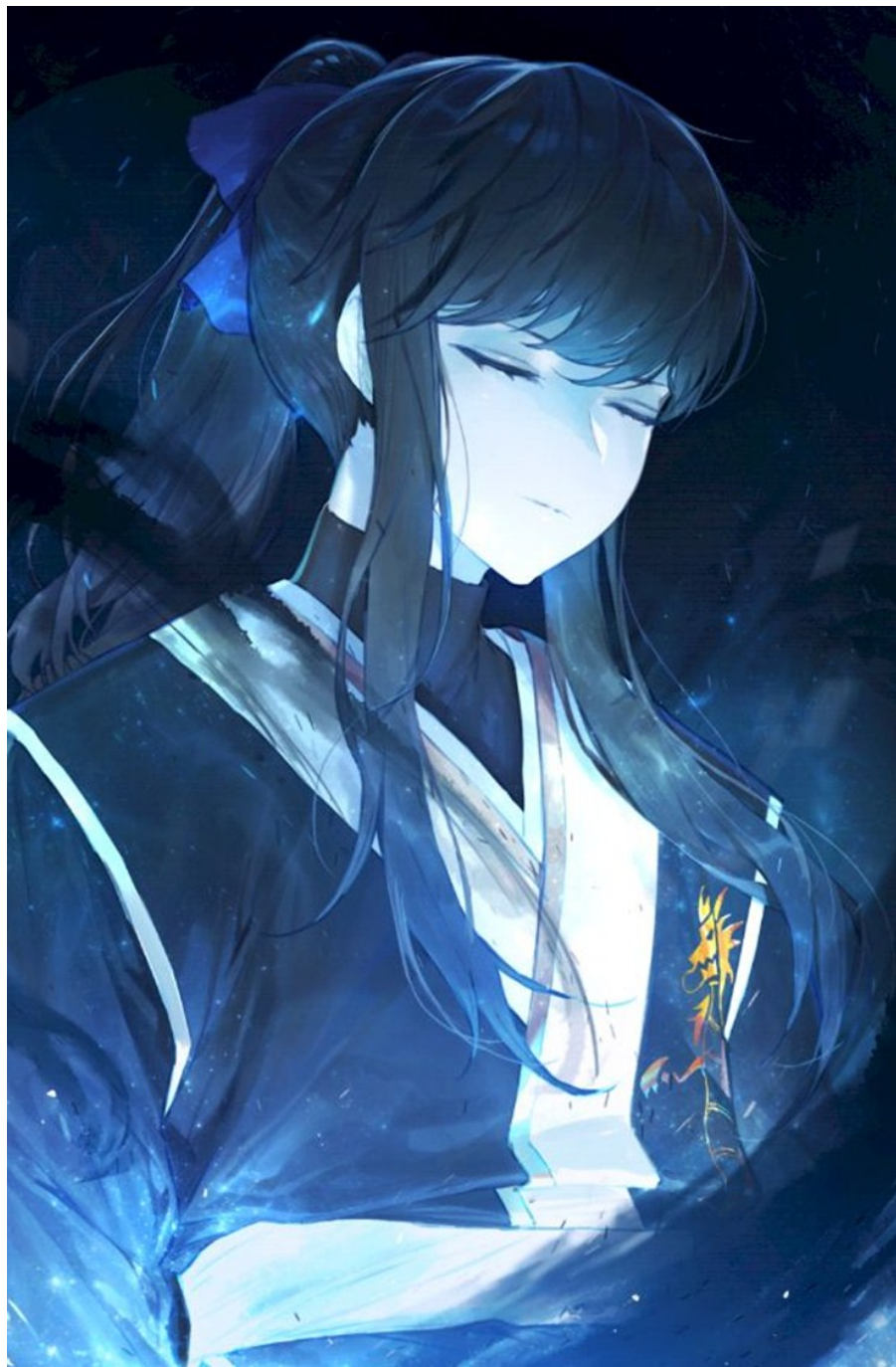
*Ssst!*

A blue light began to shine from his body.

Aura, refined by mana, began emanating from him in order to protect him.

*Sst.*

## Battle God Style Fourth Form - Black Dragon's Body Armor



The aura from his body shifted its hue to a deep black before covering his entire body. An incredible, marked improvement from before—

YuSung had never managed to reach this level in his techniques in the past.

‘I need to focus on the feel of the mana flowing through me... ’

However, he was still unable to maintain the Black Dragon’s Body armor for more than a short period of time.

*Flash!*

The black aura surrounding him dissipated, and the technique was dispelled. YuSung caught his breath as he kneeled on the ground, braced on one knee for support.

‘...So the problem is time.’

He clenched his fist in frustration.

As long as he devoted all of his efforts to his training, he was on track to properly master the fourth form. However, the Representative Selection was not too far off in the future.

YuSung didn’t feel a sense of urgency about the fact, however.

The Fist King had always impressed into him the importance of taking a break and relaxing. He had properly learned the man’s lesson when he had hung out with his party members.

It was the best advice anyone could give YuSung, who had always had a sense of urgency and desperation within himself.

‘Time to head back.’

The grinning boy’s footsteps were lighter than ever.

# Chapter 58

—An unexpected sneak attack from the centipede.

EunAh was holed up under her thin blanket.

She kept muttering, “it... it’s dangerous... the world outside is dangerous,” to herself, much like Sumire.

Sumire tried to console the other girl. “Eu-EunAh-ssi? P-please calm down! I already got rid of the centipede!”

EunAh peeked her head out from under the covers.

“O-of course I know that! it just feels gross, that’s all...” she complained. “Why are there so many bugs around here? And why have all the ones I’ve seen so far happened to be centipedes, anyways? With all of those... creepy, crawly legs...”

Sumire smiled bashfully. “Aren’t they rather pretty, considering they’re insects, though? They’re so colorful when the light hits them at a certain angle...”

“Oh my god, did everything beautiful die off when I wasn’t looking? What are you talking about?”

EunAh glared at the other girl, who just awkwardly grinned back in reply and laid down next to her in preparation to sleep.

The black-haired girl turned her gaze towards the tent entrance and sighed.

“Just what’s taking him so long, anyways?”

“H-he’ll probably take a while. Shin YuSung-ssi always... goes outside to train around this time.”

“What a busy guy. Guess I have to wait for him. It feels weird to sleep before he comes back,” she grumbled.

Sumire tilted her head to face the other girl.

“...Would you like me to tell you a fun story to pass the time, then?”

Her smile was soft, but a corner of her mouth was tilted up. EunAh had never seen her make an expression like that before and was taken aback.

“Wh-what kind of story?” she asked.

To that, Sumire lowered her voice to a whisper and continued.

“...There’s an interesting legend regarding Mount Everline. H-have you... heard about it?”

*Gulp.*

EunAh shook her head. She was already scared.

“I-I haven’t...”

“I remember everything about it... because I even heard the story back when I was in Japan. It’s about a ghost that copies other people’s voices...”

Sumire grinned ominously. EunAh pulled her blanket closer to her body and leaned away from the other girl at the same time.

“A ghost... that copies other people’s voices?”

“...Yes. I heard that it wanders the woods whenever the sun sets and day becomes night. Looking... for humans.”

*Woosh.*

A foreboding wind struck the tent.

Even the sound of leaves and grass dancing in the breeze, ordinary as it was, sent a chill down EunAh's back.

"Why? Just... why... Does it look for humans?"

Sumire's eyes were cold. "To steal... their voices."

Her near-perpetual stutter had disappeared. She locked eyes with the other girl.

"...If the ghost finds people still wandering the forest well into the night, like us, it uses the voice of someone they're familiar with and calls out towards them."

*Step step.*

Even before Sumire's ghost story had finished, the two girls could hear someone outside approaching their tent.

"Sumire?"

YuSung's voice called out to her.

"H-hieek!"

The girl in question immediately teared up, abandoning all notions of maintaining the atmosphere she had curated. EunAh had thrown her covers to the wayside and run towards Sumire.

"Wh-what the hell!! What the hell is this?!" she screamed. EunAh was terrified and clung to the other girl.

Sumire's eyes were wide open. "It... it really exists!!"

EunAh's face was drained of all blood. "What do you mean?! The ghost found us because *you* were talking about iiiit!!"

If you could call her relationship with insects one of distaste, her relationship with ghosts was one of fear.



“EunAh?”

YuSung, still outside the tent, called out EunAh’s name. She grimaced.

“Y-you’re YuSung, right? Not a ghost? Right?!”

“...A ghost? What are you talking about? I’m coming in now.”

He lowered the zipper that closed the entrance of the tent.

*Zzzzip!*

A cool, refreshing breeze entered the space.

“I... I thought so! It *was* YuSung!”

As soon as she confirmed the identity of the intruder, EunAh quickly rolled back into her spot on the tent ground.

YuSung entered the tent and began taking out his own blankets.

“What happened while I was gone?” he asked.

EunAh coughed in a fake manner, hidden under her sheets.

“Ahem! Nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

“EunAh-ssi, you’re... more of a scaredy cat than I thought you would be.”

“...Shut it.”

It seemed like the two girls had already bonded. Seeing the two of them act like so, YuSung, the party leader, relaxed.

“Time to sleep, then?”

He approached the lamp lighting up the interior of the tent, but before he could turn it off, EunAh started threatening him.

“...Hey. I’m gonna say this in advance. You know what’ll happen if you do anything funny, right?”

“Shin YuSung-ssi would never...”

And Sumire defended him again.

EunAh slapped a hand on her forehead and glared at the other girl.

“Augh! You, be quiet!”

“...Heh heh.”

However, Sumire laughed at the other girl’s actions instead of being terrified by them.

“Then, everyone. Good work.”

YuSung turned off the lamp, calling an end to the day.

Flash!

“...Yeah. You guys sleep well, okay?”

And in the pitch-black tent, EunAh sent her own quiet night greetings.

Shin YuSung, Kim EunAh, and Sumire. The three had lived completely different, separate lives from each other up to then. At that moment, however, they had become a full-fledged party.

\* \* \*

The office of the Shinsung group’s president...

Kim SeokHan was diligently working, despite the sun setting on the horizon. It was due to the philosophy he held. He believed wholeheartedly that his passion for his work was the sole reason for how he had been able to create and grow his business to what it was.

The lights in the office did not turn off until the midnight oil had been burned off. Lee SuHyun bowed after finishing her report.

“Then, Mr. President, I’ll be heading back now.”

“Mhm, go ahead.”

She tried to leave the office after her boss’s acknowledgment. However, the man seemed to have suddenly recalled a question to ask of her.

“Hold on a minute. Come to think of it... I never got to hear any news about my EunAh. I know she went out on an extracurricular activity, but not much else...”

“The young miss is out on a monster-hunting excursion with Shin YuSung at the Academy City branch of the Association.”

Kim SeokHan nodded at SuHyun’s explanation.

“That sounds about right, but shouldn’t she have returned to her dorms by now?”

“The monster hunting assignment is scheduled to last one night and two days.”

Kim SeokHan’s face stiffened at her calm reply.

“Wh-what is that supposed to mean?”

His face was drained of all blood.

“An o-o-overnight trip! Are you saying that, m-my EunAh! My EunAh! Is out on an overnight trip?!” he yelled.

A hand slammed down on his desk. SuHyun flinched.

“What?! Y-yes, yes!” she replied immediately. “She is... is there an issue?!”

“Of course there is. What are you saying?! There’s no saying what that wretch could do to my EunAh! An overnight trip? Overnight?!”

In face of the news about the overnight trip, YuSung’s label had changed from ‘a hunter with incredible potential’ to ‘a wretch’, just like that.

“And just what were you doing, not stopping her? Huh?!”

The normally cold Kim SeokHan was shouting at SuHyun. She broke out into a cold sweat.

“B-but... that’s the typical amount of time that monster hunt missions are assigned.”

“And that’s supposed to make this alright? All boys in their teens—no! All men, really! They’re nothing but animals...”

And so the man droned on. SuHyun found the entire situation rather unfair.

‘Come on. She’s the one who said she wanted to go on the trip! What was I supposed to do, stop her?’

SuHyun was the one who had helped and convinced EunAh to send the message to Shin YuSung in the first place, though. If that fact got out, there was no chance of the man with the granddaughter complex letting her off easy.

“And my EunAh is still young. You should have dissuaded her more! A boy and a girl, two different sexes, going on an overnight trip together?! And she’s at the age where even the slightest action can send her heart into a frenzy...”

The lecture from the man of iron blood, the man standing at the top of the financial world, continued on. It was enough for SuHyun to want to lose her mind.

‘Please, just let me off work.’

Sleeping in the middle of the wilderness...

YuSung's senses were on high alert, even when he was asleep. He had fostered this habit while living on the Martial Spirits' Mountain.

But what made him wake up at that moment was not the sneak attack of an enemy but the ramblings of someone disturbed yet fast asleep.

"U-ugh... don't go..."

YuSung, wide awake, channeled mana into his eyes. Slowly, his vision improved. Only then could he see EunAh, grimace on her face, being hugged by him.

"U-urk..."

She had broken out in a cold sweat. He wasn't sure what sort of dream she was having at the moment, but judging by the overturned sheets, it was definitely some sort of nightmare.

'...Probably one related to her brother.'

The EunAh that YuSung had first met was strong. No, at the very least, she pretended to be strong on the outside. It was how she had always presented herself up to that point.

But as he got closer to her, he realized that the EunAh he had gotten to know was different.

She had surrendered to a villain for the sake of her brother and begged YuSung for his help to the point of spilling tears—that was how delicate her true feelings were.

"...Don't leave me."

EunAh tightly grabbed YuSung's clothes as if saying that she would never let him go. Left with nothing else he could do, YuSung began

patting her head.

He had no idea if Kim JunHyuk had ever done so to his little sister before.

He had just done something that he had deduced was likely to have happened.



*Slip.*

Only then did EunAh loosen the grip she had on his clothes. The boy easily lifted the girl from that spot and placed her next to Sumire.

YuSung had gotten a glimpse into her fragile side. It was nothing new or revolutionary to him, however. He believed all people had some sort of damage in their hearts that they kept secret from others.

Just because one was strong didn't mean they could be strong all of the time.

Just because one was fine didn't mean they could be fine all of the time.

‘A person's body isn't the only thing that can get hurt, after all.’

YuSung returned to his own spot and draped his sheets over himself. The last thought he had before drifting off into slumber was about EunAh.

‘...EunAh's sleepwalking habit is pretty bad, huh.’



# Chapter 59

The calm, peaceful interior of the tent...

An inexplicable, uncomfortable feeling was slowly waking EunAh up from her slumber. She was still quite out of it, however.

‘...Hm?’

She tried to move her body but found that she couldn’t—someone had locked her into an embrace from behind.

‘Wh-what’s going on here?’

EunAh’s face had grown pale.

‘Don’t tell me... Sh-Shin YuSung! I-I knew it! I knew you’d do this!’

EunAh stiffened. Her brain, however, was going through some serious inner turmoil after coming to this conclusion.

‘Wh-what should I do?! Actually, is he even doing this deliberately? Maybe it’s involuntary?! Don’t some people have a habit of hugging others when they fall asleep?!’

Right at that moment, the person who had hugged her from behind bit her ear with their mouth.

*Chill.*

—A sensation that raised all of the hairs on EunAh’s body.

Her face grew red—there was no chance in hell that it was done by accident. EunAh’s fist was shaking from anger.

‘I’ll kill you... I’ll really kill you... ’

She couldn’t accept behavior like that, even from the man who had saved her brother's life.

And right when she was about to lash out with her arm...

She heard a faint mumbling from the vicinity of her bitten ear.

“Huuu... sob! Munch munch... My karaage is tastierrr...”



The identity of the one mumbling was Sumire.

She was even chewing on EunAh's ear as if it was a food she was eating.

“What the hell, is she crazy...?”

EunAh stood up from her spot on the ground, face red.

“Hey! Sleep more calmly, won’t you?!” she yelled furiously, kicking Sumire with her foot.

“...Hueeee.”

A sound like a deflating balloon escaped from the girl’s mouth as she began to roll away from the force of the kick. Sumire only stopped rolling when she hit the corner of the tent.

EunAh took out a handkerchief from her Pocket and wiped the spit on her ear.

“Ugh! Gross...”

She glared at the other girl for some time until finally letting out a sigh, bothered by Sumire’s prone body. She picked up the discarded blanket and draped it over the girl before crawling over to the entrance of the tent and lowering the zipper.

*Zip.*

EunAh walked outside. The early morning dew gave the forest breeze a unique scent—her lungs cleared as she breathed in the fresh air.

She straightened her back and looked into the distance.

‘...The sun will rise soon.’

If she had to guess, it would take around one to two hours. She grimaced as she thought of something else.

‘...Shin YuSung will catch the lake dragon, I bet.’

EunAh may call herself strong and say that Electricity was one of the best Traits in Korea, but in a situation like theirs, it was nothing but

talk.

It wasn't like it was her fault since the opponent was immune to electricity, but EunAh felt like she was only making excuses and running away.

‘What can I do, though? Electricity doesn’t work on it... ’

She began thinking deeply about the matter; her face stiffened into a grimace.

Right when she was doing so, the zipper opened.

*Zip.*

YuSung crawled out of the tent. He seemed already prepared to start the day.

“EunAh. Looks like you woke up early.”

“Same goes for you.”

“I need to prepare the trap.”

“A trap?”

That was the first time that EunAh had heard that a trap was in the equation. She was curious. YuSung flashed her a smile as he took out the plant he had gathered the day before from his Pocket.

“I can make one if I slowly grind these herbs with a rock.”

The herbs that YuSung had taken out were the viscous herb and the steerus.

*Squirt! Squirt!*

Thick and sticky sap seeped out of the viscous herb as he ground it down with a rock. As he ground the steerus on the same rock, the

viscous herb's sap slowly turned grey.

“What is this?”

“The lake dragon leaves the lake and lays down on the largest boulder it can see when it's morning time.”

EunAh recalled what YuSung had said in the portal room.

“Yeah, I was kinda listening to what you were saying before...”

“What do you think would happen if we spread this liquid all over that boulder?”

The grey-colored sap blended fairly well with the color of the boulder the lake dragon usually laid itself on. It was also quite sticky.

“Hmm.”

EunAh drew her head closer to the sap to inspect it.

“...Will this work? That dragon is really big.”

“The viscous herb's sap gets even stickier when it makes contact with water, which the lake dragon has plenty of dripping off its scales. And the larger something is, the more surface area it has for the sap to stick onto.”

YuSung's explanation was thorough and detailed. EunAh's face darkened as she heard it. She adjusted her stance so that she could properly face him, eye to eye.

“...You're incredible.”

—Sincere words of admiration, without a trace of sarcasm.

YuSung was born with an F-rank Trait, but he had devoted himself to training on the Martial Spirits' Mountain for 12 years. Even though he had been abandoned by his family, he didn't give up on himself.

Similarly, even when he had become strong, he never grew arrogant.

The fact that he had prepared a trap to catch the lake dragon was proof that he gave it his all, no matter what the ordeal or opponent.

EunAh tasted something bitter on the tip of her tongue.

‘...Everything other people have said about me is right.’

All of the gossip that had grazed her ears over the years...

‘I’m just lucky.’

—Her beauty.

—Her incredibly fortunate household.

—A Trait with an incredibly high potential for growth.

None of those were things that EunAh had were things she had to earn with her own two hands.

‘...And when I fought those monsters, I thought I couldn’t do anything because they were bad match-ups... I feel like an idiot.’

*Grrk.*

EunAh bit her lip.

‘I really am...’

EunAh looked at YuSung, who was grinding out the sap from the herbs. While she was busy blaming everything else but herself in a dire situation, even when everything had been handed to her on a silver platter, YuSung tried his hardest to the end.

Perhaps that was why she couldn’t rescue her brother. EunAh fell into deep thought about the matter.

“...Hey.”

Eventually, she raised her voice. YuSung faced the girl, who had a serious expression on her face.

“This is, uh... a bit of a weird request, but...”

“Mmm... I-I’m also awake...”

Sumire took that moment to announce that she had woken up. EunAh, seeing the girl approach them, immediately shut her mouth.

“EunAh?”

YuSung peered up at her curiously.

“I’ll tell you later.”

It seemed like she wanted to talk to him one-on-one. YuSung pocketed the small container that stored the grey-colored sap and stood up, walking towards the large boulder, he then opened the lid and poured its contents on a leaf.

*Drip.*

He then used the leaf to spread the sap all over the boulder.

“Okay, everyone. Let’s hide before the sun rises.

YuSung wasn’t just satisfied with setting the trap. He pulled up bits of grass and foliage as he made his way back to the other two. EunAh was bemused.

“Hide? And what’s that for?”

“We have to disguise ourselves if we want to hide,” he answered as if it were obvious. “First, let’s rub mud all over our hair.”

“H-huh? Mud?!” Sumire gulped and eyed the girl next to her.



“Y-you’re kidding, right?”

But YuSung was serious.

Employ every advantage you have and do your utmost to prepare against your opponent, even when you’re fighting a monster weaker than you. That was YuSung’s philosophy.

\* \* \*

The rising sun in the sky...

Shin YuSung, Kim EunAh, and Sumire—the three were crouched down and hiding in the foliage as if they were predators waiting for their prey.

EunAh was upset. Why? Blades of grass were tangled into her hair.

‘Do we really have to do all of this?’

Her persistent arguing had, at least, spared her hair from getting dirt all over it. In any case, the three had become one with nature.

Time passed. Just when EunAh’s body was about to relax due to the warming weather, she heard a sound in the distance.

*Boom! Boom!*

The lake dragon emerged from the water, signaled by the sound of its giant footsteps.

“Grr... Kaaa!”

It raised its head into the sky and bellowed out a large cry into the air.

*Flap flap!*

The birds in the area, surprised by the noise, flew away from the nearby treetops.

The emperor of Mount Everline...

The lord of the lake...

The dragon stalked towards the boulder with confident strides befitting its many titles.

*Womp!*

“...Krr?”

And it lay down on the rock—that was its mistake. The dragon began struggling to free itself from the boulder that had been slathered with the sap of the viscous herb.

*Boom!*

The lake dragon managed to tear itself away from the boulder but lost its balance and fell. Sumire, seeing her chance, yelled towards the woods.

“Death Knight-ssi!”

“Master’s or... ders... everyone, att... ack!”

*Rooooar!*

Various types of skeleton knights rushed towards the lake dragon, the death knight riding its trusty steed included.

*Toss!*

The knights threw a net over the dragon in order to stop it from moving any further. Enraged, the lake dragon swiped at the skeletons with its front leg.

*Bash!!*

The skeleton knights hit by the attacks crumbled instantly and

despawnd. It wasn't a big deal, however—in the first place, they were nothing but bait to stall for time.

EunAh and YuSung looked at each other.

As their eyes met, EunAh gave the boy a nod and smiled.

“Thanks.”

Then she began running towards the lake dragon. YuSung, on the other hand, stayed in place. That was all due to the promise they had made earlier.

[...Hey, YuSung. Can you let the two of us defeat the lake dragon?]

[H-huhhh?! D-do you mean, just you and me... without Shin YuSung-ssi?]

EunAh herself knew that her request was unreasonable. It wasn't a training session; it was real life, with all of the dangers associated with it. Normally, one would use YuSung's strength to conclude the hunt as quickly as possible.

However, EunAh's gaze was more sincere than it ever had been up to that moment.

What she was trying to attempt right then was important. If she kept making excuses for herself by blaming element compatibility—if she kept giving up whenever a situation wasn't in her favor—then nothing would change, and EunAh had already avoided many situations of that nature.

She was scared of being used.

She was scared of being betrayed.

She was scared of losing someone like her brother again, someone she had opened up to. Thus, EunAh avoided getting close to others.

She would never have to say farewell to anyone as long as she never got to know another person.

She would never have to get hurt as long as she never felt happiness.

She had put up walls all around her heart, built using various justifications she had concocted by herself.

Watching YuSung, however, made EunAh understand.

‘If I...’

If she never tried something, nothing would happen; nothing would change. All she could do was stay in one place and wait to rot like a stagnant pool of water.

EunAh didn’t want that.

She already knew what would happen if someone broke under the weight of all of the expectations and tried to run away from it all. She had seen it happen with her own eyes, after all.

‘...No matter how much I try to avoid them, my problems will not solve themselves.’

What EunAh needed at that moment was courage—the courage to try and change herself.

YuSung smiled as he saw her determination.

“EunAh, you really are strong, aren’t you?”

He had known it since the first time the two had locked eyes with each other, and as expected, his instincts hadn’t failed him. EunAh was one of those ‘hunters with incredible potential’ that his master had taught him about.

*Ring!*

“Kuohhhh-!”

The lake dragon continued to roar into the sky, head tilted upwards.

*Clap! Bzzt!*

EunAh clapped and surrounded her entire body with electricity. She answered the boy with a confident grin.

“Course. Who do you think I am?”

*Tup!*

With those words, she ran towards the dragon.

There was no guarantee of one’s safety if they faced off against a monster with a bad match-up. Despite that fact, YuSung stayed firmly in place and watched.

He believed in his party member,

And EunAh wanted to change herself more than she had ever before. To them, how efficiently the hunt went wasn’t important.

# Chapter 60

The effects of the methods used to hunt a monster became more prominent the more evenly matched hunter's strength was to the monster's. EunAh's opponent just happened to be a lake dragon with electric affinity—a bad match-up.

*Flash! Tup!*

EunAh challenged the dragon using her own specialty: speed.

*Woosh!*

She dodged a swipe from its claws and ran to the side, drawing its gaze towards her. It was a piece of cake for her to avoid the attacks from a monster of its size.

“Grr!”

Next was Sumire's turn.

“E-everyone, aim and fire!”

With her cry, the skeletons under her command drew their bows made of bone and targeted the lake dragon.

*Woosh! Twang! Twangtwangtwang!*

Arrows shot into the air, flying straight towards the dragon's body. Instead of blocking or trying to avoid the barrage, however, the lake dragon roared at it instead.

“Kraaaaaa!!”

The arrows lost their momentum and clattered to the ground. An

attack of that caliber would not affect it.

Sumire began mumbling to EunAh with a serious expression on her face. “EunAh-ssi... a-all of the arrows fell out of the sky. Its scales are too hard for them to pierce, too...”

The A Class girl bit her lip in reply. The scales on the lake dragon could both block any attacks from the skeletons and absorb any electricity she threw at it.

“...If it just didn’t have those scales!”

The hardened exterior of the dragon looked to be impossible to pierce with either girl’s firepower.

But they couldn’t give up just because of that. EunAh quickly scanned their opponent in an effort to find some way to defeat it.

‘A place without any scales... ’

Her eyes landed on the dragon’s one weakness: its belly.

However, if one aimed for the dragon’s stomach, they would naturally have to get closer to its front legs. Death knights and skeleton knights weren’t mobile enough to approach the dragon in time before its claws decimated them.

‘...I’m the only one out of everyone here who can do this.’

There was another problem: electricity didn’t work on the dragon. EunAh racked her head, trying to figure out what to attack it with.

‘Let’s... let’s think about it. A way to finish off the lake dragon in one shot... ’

“Grrr!”

Right then, the dragon took a swipe at EunAh, claws just barely skimming above her head.

Sumire covered her mouth in shock at the sight.

“Hieek!”

“Don’t worry! I’m fine!”

EunAh put up a brave front in order to calm the other girl. Even so, her hands were shaking. Her opponent was a gigantic monster that her Trait had no effect against—it was no wonder she was scared.

‘So that really is the only method, then.’

*Bzzzt!*

EunAh’s hands crackled with lightning.

“Grr!”

The lake dragon bared its teeth.

The girl flew towards its stomach and planted her fist into the flesh, leaving an afterimage of her electricity behind her.

*Flash! Zap! Bzzzt!*

The dragon roared in pain.

“Kuaaaaaa!”

Its electricity-absorbing ability only extended to its scales. EunAh’s attack was absolutely doing damage to it.

“EunAh-ssi! Your side!”

*Thwack! Bam!*

But the price she paid to get close to the dragon was steep. EunAh was struck in the shoulder by the monster’s claws and was flung into the



dirt, forced to roll for some time due to the force of the hit.

“Eu-EunAh-ssi!!” Sumire shrieked. The girl in question staggered up to her knees, arms keeping her steady on the ground.

But that was not the end of the dragon’s attacks.

*Boom!*

Next, it struck her back.

It whipped its tail like a mace and struck her hard, forcing her to collapse in the opposite direction. The mana barrier that she had prepared in advance shattered, leaving her body streaked with dirt and dust. Blood was flowing free from her forehead. The force of the attack was enough to make her woozy.

YuSung, who had done nothing but watch that entire time, finally entered the battlefield to support EunAh with his body and help her escape from the dragon.

“I-I can. I can still...”

The girl kept muttering the same thing over and over again, even while YuSung was half-dragging her outside of the monster’s attack range.

“The next attack could drive you unconscious,” was his calm reply.

He had seen plenty of EunAh’s courage. Even if she quit the fight at that point, her value as a comrade who he could entrust his back to had been more than proven to him.

Even so, EunAh shook her head frantically. The next words that escaped her mouth were incredibly clear.

“...I can still do this.”

She wasn’t saying that as some half-hearted attempt to recover her

pride. It wasn't out of stubbornness, either. EunAh had thought things over and made a rational judgement.

Even if her opponent was a bad match-up against her, there was still a chance she could win if she found its weak point. EunAh's palms crackled with lightning once more, and she glared at the lake dragon.

Sumire, anguished, watched the other girl face off against the dragon once more.

"Why are you pushing yourself so much...?"

EunAh smirked at the question.

She was the type of person who laughed in the face of those who lost and the efforts they had put in, thinking it had all been useless.

Just why, though, had she not given up on the fight, even when blood was running down her forehead? All she had to do was ask YuSung for help, and everything would be taken care of.

"...Who knows."

EunAh didn't know why herself.

There were countless reasons that one could point to as the definitive one if one was inclined.

—Because she couldn't rescue her brother from the villain due to her own weakness.

—Because she had fled from any opportunities to make human connections, fearful of getting hurt.

—Because she had ignored the reason as to why Kim JunHyun had taken supplements for far too long.

However, what EunAH was struggling with was nothing nearly as complicated as any of that.

“It’s just that... I don’t wanna run away this time.”

\* \* \*

Making up her mind, EunAh took out a dark meteorite from her Pocket and threw it on the ground.

*Shatter!*

The sky was instantly covered with dark rainclouds as the stone shattered into pieces.

The skeletons around EunAH were shattering under the force of the lake dragon’s cry. While scanning the area, her eyes zeroed in on a certain object.

“Hey! I’m gonna borrow this, okay?”

The object she was pointing at was a giant sword that the death knight had let out of its grasp.

“B-but its weight...” mumbled Sumire. The sword was completely made up of gold, all the way to the hilt. Basically, it was a sword-shaped lump of metal.

“Doesn’t matter!” EunAh shouted.

*Bzzt!*

She surrounded her entire body with electricity. With it, she focused on boosting her speed and the strength of her muscles.

A body enhancement technique of that caliber exceeded her limits, consuming several times more mana than usual. It was an inefficient method of combat and put the user at risk of collapsing from mana depletion.

But she knew...

‘I won’t be able to defeat this monster... with a half-hearted attack!’

The lake dragon was going on a rampage, swinging its legs and claws every which way. EunAh gripped the sword tightly in her hands, then ran towards the lake dragon, hair flying behind her. As she kept putting in more speed to her movements, it created a crackling sound wave that became louder as she approached the monster.

‘A bit more!’

She could no longer control the speed she was running at. EunAh shot towards the dragon like an arrow that had left its bow.

‘Still not enough! More!’

Even so, she accelerated even more, leaving a blue afterimage behind her like the tail of a comet.

She was solely focused on her goal: the dragon’s belly.

*Swipe!*

The monster noticed her and swung its claws at her with incredible reflexes.

However, it was meaningless.

EunAh, as if insulting its act of resistance, heightened her speed even more and dove in between the thrashing paws.

Flaaaash!!

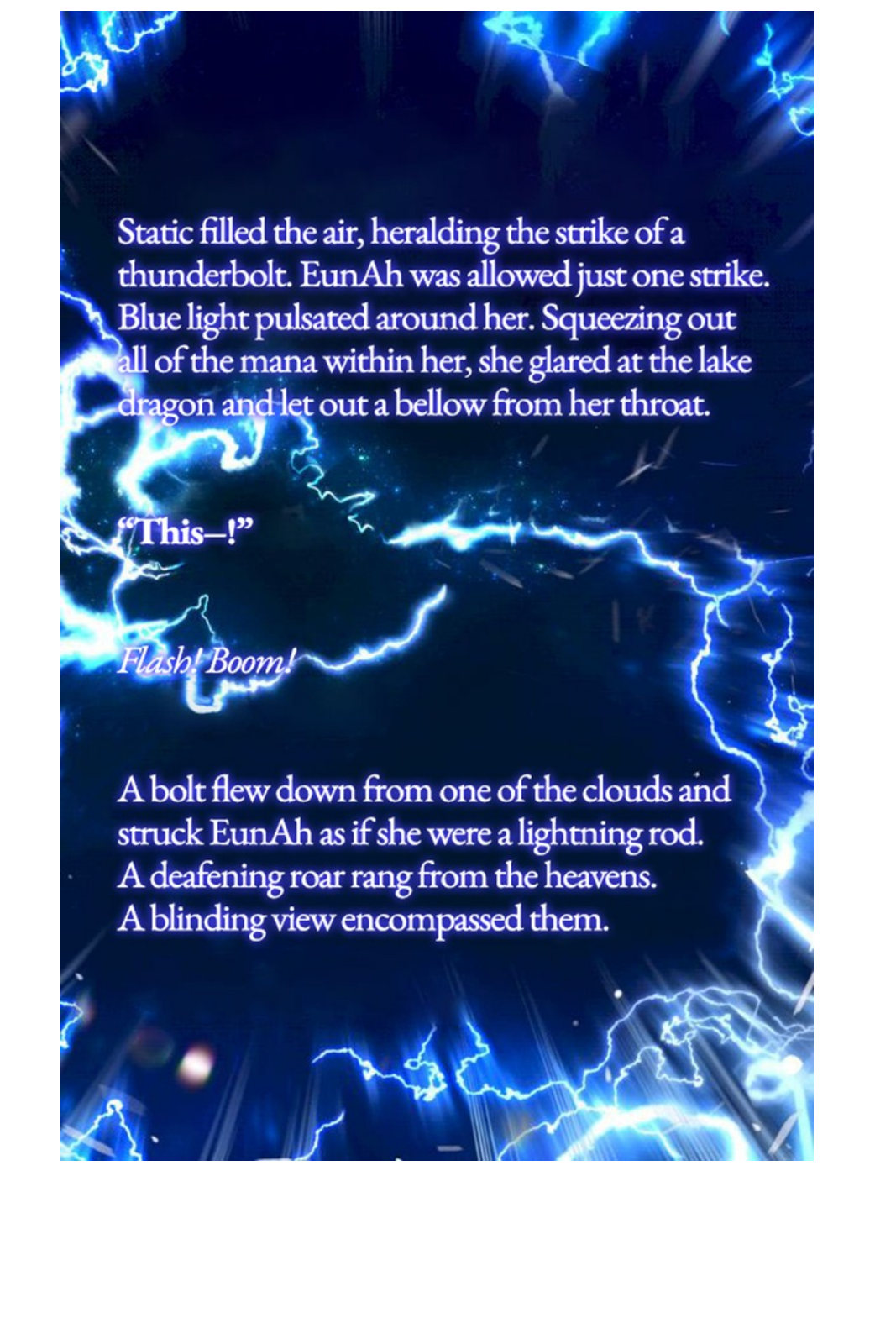
—The chilling sound of a massive hunk of metal cutting through flesh.

“Kraaaaah!”

The lake dragon raised its head and let out a pain-filled cry. The place where it had been struck was its vulnerable stomach.

“Take...”





Static filled the air, heralding the strike of a thunderbolt. EunAh was allowed just one strike. Blue light pulsated around her. Squeezing out all of the mana within her, she glared at the lake dragon and let out a bellow from her throat.

**“This—!”**

*Flash! Boom!*

A bolt flew down from one of the clouds and struck EunAh as if she were a lightning rod. A deafening roar rang from the heavens. A blinding view encompassed them.





“Uuu...”

Sumire managed to let out a breath amidst her nervousness. The scene, completely bathed in white light, was only just starting to

regain its colors.

The lake dragon was collapsed on the ground.

EunAh, next to it, was catching her breath.

“Eu-EunAh-ssi!” she cried out.

The A Class girl had truly done the impossible. In fact, that was her first victory as a member of YuSung’s party.

EunAh had a vibrant grin on her face, a contrast to her usual expression.

“S-see that? Even a bad match-up is nothing...”

*Wobble!*

EunAh began losing her balance, tired from over-expending her mana. YuSung walked up to her and grabbed her from the side in order to support her.

“Are you alright, EunAh?”

“...Uh. Mhm.”

She stared up at the boy, then laughed. Her body was in a sorry state.

*Tilt.*

With no other choice, she leaned against YuSung. It was hard for EunAh to even stay standing, as her legs were shaking from exertion. Her body felt heavy.

Despite all of that, she felt emotionally lighter than ever. All of the complicated worries and problems she had in her mind had disappeared as if washed away. EunAh grinned bashfully, ecstatic about her win.



“I knew it... I could do it.”

“Good work, EunAh.”

YuSung, as her comrade, was also sincerely happy for her about that achievement.

“Eu-EunAh-ssi!”

Sumire ran towards the other girl and embraced her, crying all the while.

“Sob! But there’s blood on your forehead... waah, I bet it hurts a lot...”

“Aw, c’mom... I’m fine. Why are you crying? It’s not like anyone died or anything.”

“S-Still...”

Sumire treated EunAh as precious, if not more so, than how she treated herself. The monster hunt had strengthened the bond between the two girls.

*Flash.*

Something golden glinted off the body of the fallen dragon.

YuSung slowly approached the corpse and took out an orb.

“...This is?”

A Golden orb had been hidden inside the dragon’s body. EunAh’s eyes widened as she saw it— another rare sight from her. Sumire’s gaze was also drawn to the orb.

“N-no way, is that an artifact?”

“I-it is! It’s an artifact!”

EunAh had managed to find a subspecies of lake dragon. On top of that, the dragon just happened to drop an artifact. Her luck truly was incredible.

An increase in overall power for the party was always good news. YuSung smiled proudly and extended his hand, and the orb, towards EunAh.

“You check its properties yourself, EunAh.”

“...Sure.”

She nodded, then carefully pressed a button on her Pocket.

*Flash!*

The Pocket flashed, then began displaying information about the artifact on a hologram.

Thankfully, the ‘Tower Records’ had an entry about the Thunder Dragon’s Orb.



<THUNDER DRAGON'S ORB>  
SPECIAL RARE

INFO - AN ORB FOUND INSIDE A LAKE DRAGON SUBSPECIES. ALL OF THE ENERGY ABSORBED BY THE DRAGON'S SCALES ARE STORED IN THE ORB AND CONDENSED INTO ELECTRICITY.

INFO 2 - IT HAS THE POWER TO STRENGTHEN ELECTRICITY-BASED TRAITS IF THE PERSON ABSORBS IT BY EATING IT AND LETTING IT MELT IN THEIR MOUTH.

INFO 3 - IT TASTES EXTREMELY SWEET IN THE BEGINNING, BUT BY THE END WILL BE SOUR ENOUGH TO LEAVE YOUR TONGUE NUMB.

Strengthens electricity-based Traits...

The effect of the artifact was simple. It was an elixir that the user had to consume, like Adela's 10,000-Year-Old Ice Crystal. In that sense,

the owner of the artifact had already been decided.

“Mm...”

EunAh turned her eyes away from the other two and scratched her cheek, embarrassed. YuSung let out a quiet laugh and placed the orb into the girl’s hands, closing her hands over it.

“Congratulations, EunAh.”

“Huh? What? We all worked hard together to obtain this, it’s a little weird that I’m the only one to...”

Sumire frantically waved her arms as a sign of dissent at the flustered EunAh.

“I-I’m fine! And besides, the artifact suits you really well, EunAh-ssi!”

“But I’m the one who kept insisting we hunt the dragon my way! if I take this, too, then...”

Say she took the artifact. Wasn’t there something she could do for her party members as payment? EunAh pondered this for some time.

“Oh, how about this?”

But not for too long.

YuSung wanted to obtain a room for his party. However, even if he managed to gain permission from the school to do so, he needed a staggering amount of money to buy one.

EunAh finished her calculations and grinned. With a flippant gesture, she took out her black credit card from her wallet and held it up.

“Will this suffice for you guys?”

It just so happened that EunAh was up to her ears in cash.

# Chapter 61

YuSung's party returned back to the Association branch after taking care of the lake dragon subspecies. Mei Lin checked their documents, then aimed a thin smile at the group.

“...As I thought, you all took care of it with no problem.”

*Clack clack.*

She returned to her seat, high heels clicking against the floor. With an elegant wave of her hand, she began a phone call with another person.

But that elegance only lasted for a moment. As soon as the other person accepted her call, Mei Lin's demeanor instantly became polite and demure.

“Ah, yes, yes! Correct. Everything has been taken care of, as reported. It all wrapped up just now, in fact.”

It was a rather sad look for the manager of Academy City. She didn't have a choice in how to hold herself in that case, though—the person on the other end of the line was Kang YuChan, the person holding the highest position in the Hunter Association.

“Yes! Yes, yes... I understand.”

She smiled and nodded her head.

– Huh huh! I knew YuSung would do it! Even if the Fist King's personality is like that, when I see how he raised YuSung, I'm reminded once more that he truly is my rival.

Kang YuChan sung the boy's praises for some time. At some point, however, he stopped and began giving his subordinate some covert instructions.

– Ah, speaking of... Didn't Japan send over an expedition request recently? I remember hearing about it involving a rather peculiar dungeon.

“Japan... are you talking about the Castle of Nightmares?”

The Association president nodded in response.

– Yeah. If possible, could you hand that request over to our YuSung? A hunter wields the experiences they go through as their weapon!... I'm sure an expedition to another country will be a great experience for him, as well.

“I understand. So, if possible, I should hand the expedition request from Italy over to student Shin YuSung, as well...”

– Huh, huh! Sounds good! Please tell him all of this after the Representative Selection has ended. There's plenty of time between it and the International Competition, after all.

“Yes, sir.”

With a short reply, Mei Lin ended the call. She sighed, letting out all of her pent-up nervous energy. Even someone as high up in the ranks as her would be hard-pressed to confront her superior.

Unfortunately, she was forced to perform similar calls to Kang YuChan every day due to the man's vested interest in keeping tabs on Shin YuSung and anything related to the boy.

‘A student that the Association president is keeping an eye out on. On top of that, his master is the Fist King... ’

Had a hunter with such a high pedigree appeared before? Due to that, even someone with a managerial position like Mei Lin was having a tough time dealing with YuSung.

‘...My workload increased again. Oh well, nothing I can do about that. I'll just have to stick close to Shin YuSung and see how he performs during the Selection.’

The enormous mansion of the Shinsung group, considered to be royalty of the modern era...

The land that the mansion was built on boasted enough acres to rival the land used by Gaon Academy. Thanks to the enormous size of the estate, one needed to take a car from the entrance of the estate to the main building if they wanted to reach it in a timely manner, but EunAh was already used to all of this.

*Slam.*

She disembarked the lengthy limousine, sunglasses perched on her face. Lee SuHyun smiled and greeted her.

“My sincere congratulations for defeating a rank 4 boss monster, Miss. And I heard some rumors that you’ve obtained an artifact, as well. Fufu...”

“Oh, that? Eh~ it was nothing!”

Despite her words, though, EunAh’s face was beaming with pride at her accomplishment.

”Where’s dad and grandpa, by the way? I went and used an outing pass and everything.”

“The president arrived here thirty minutes ago. As for the vice-president, he will not be able to make it today.”

“...That so?”

A smattering of disappointment showed up on EunAh’s face. She quickly covered it up with a careless-sounding laugh.

“Can’t help it, then... Dad’s busy ‘cause of his work, after all.”

EunAh made her way towards the outdoor party venue, where various

employees of the Shinsung group and her relatives, including Kang YuChan, were waiting.

“Hahaha, here you are, my adorable little EunAh! Come on, quick, sit next to your dear old grandpa. I’ve been waiting for my little puppy for so long...”

The iron-blooded Kang YuChan began guffawing like an idiot. All of the relatives carefully eyed his reactions.

Eventually, one of them spoke up, chancing their luck. “EunAh~ your grandpa said so many good things about you while we were waiting.”

“Oh, come on, grandpa.” EunAh glared. “Stop saying stuff like that. It’s embarrassing.”

“Ha ha ha! But your grandpappy here is so proud of his little puppy! What am I supposed to do about it?”

Kim SeokHan then petted her head, causing her to straighten her back with a pleased expression on her face.

“Well, I guess I was pretty amazing this time around!” she boasted. “I managed to defeat a boss monster, one that was a bad match-up against me, too. And I also got an artifact.”

The meal at the mansion had already become a celebration party where people were singing EunAh’s praises. The girl in question then took out the Thunder Dragon’s Orb from her Pocket.

“I asked someone, and they told me I should just eat it like candy. YuSung let me have it.”

Hearing that, Kim SeokHan’s heart grew warm.

‘...Shin YuSung, you’re quite skilled at toeing the line. Truly, you are a man I shouldn’t underestimate. “

‘I should do the boy a favor in return for this later on,’ he thought.



“Camping was more fun than I thought it would be. There were a lot of bugs, though, and the tent was kind of cramped.”

And right as he thought so, EunAh came in with an outrageous declaration. Her careless words made every Shinsung employee at the table stiffen in shock.

One of the relatives broke out into a cold sweat as they saw the expression on Kim SeokHan’s face.

“Haha! Er, Mr. P-President! Let’s eat before our meal grows cold...”

*Lift.*

Kim SeokHan stretched out a hand to stop them.

“...Ho ho. EunAh, about that, wh-what’s... what do you mean by that? A tent?”

Kim SeokHan’s question seemed innocuous, so EunAh began answering him while picking up some food with her fork.

“Oh, that! Yeah, at first, I told him that I’d never sleep in the same tent as a guy, but...”

Her expression stiffened. Only then did it look like she realized what the question was about.

“He brought one tent...”

*Munch munch.*

EunAh purposefully turned her head towards the lobster salad she was eating to avoid the man’s gaze.

“Wow, this isn’t bad! Grandpa, w-we should focus on the meal, don’t you think?!” She seemed to like the taste.

“Y-yes, we should!” he replied, trying to smother himself as much as

possible.

“But EunAh,” he asked gently, “you aren’t saying... that you camped outside using a tent, are you?”

“Wh-what, it’s not like I could just sleep on the ground!” EunAh’s face grew more and more red as she kept talking. “And there was another girl with us, her name’s Sumire! So don’t worry! Nothing happened!”

Kim SeokHan was radiating killing intent from his pores. ‘How dare that boy camp with the successor of the Shinsung group, *my precious granddaughter*, outside and in the same tent? And with another girl, to boot.’

To his eyes, YuSung’s treachery knew no bounds.

‘Shin YuSung! You little...!’

Starting from that moment, Kim SeokHan would firmly etch every stroke of the boy’s name into his heart.



\* \* \*

The recipient of Gaon Academy's headmaster's favoritism...

YuSung still didn't have enough SP to buy a team room. However, using the extracurricular he had just gone on and the Representative Selection as a reason, Kin ByungCheol had handed him the rest of the SP he needed.

‘...But here I thought I'd have a harder time gathering the money needed.’

The club room that he had bought was nearly completely empty. YuSung sat down on a worn chair someone had abandoned in the room and began to think.

“Mm...”

20 million won could buy him 16,000 banana-flavored milks (1,200 won each), and he would still have money left over. He could drink three bottles of it every day for over ten years.

Considering that was the case, just how much money was 400 million won?

[Deposited amount: 400,000,000]

[Total balance: 422,523,000]

YuSung stared at the hologram with a serious expression on his face.

‘I knew she was rich, but... ’

To think that she was rich enough to give 400 million won like it was nothing. He had refused the offer at first, of course, but EunAh was adamant.

[C'mon, just take it already. Who said this is payment for the artifact? I don't want to spend my time hanging around in our team room if it's gonna be shabby.]

It was obvious that she was trying to be considerate of the boy, though.

If a party wanted to function, it needed a room. To buy and furnish the room, one obviously needed SP and money. Of course, the headmaster's unending persistence led to the boy having plenty of the former; the same was not the case regarding money, however.

But EunAh had lifted that burden from his shoulders

‘That’s one problem down, thanks to her.’

While YuSung was carefully inspecting the room he had chosen, someone opened the door.

“So this is the place you’ve chosen.”

It was So HaeJung, one of the instructors at Gaon Academy.

She looked around the room as if reminiscing, cracking a soft smile.

“The sun shines through quite nicely.”

It was the room that she had used back when she was a student at Gaon. Even the always-clerical So HaeJung seemed to be lost in her thoughts.

“...It’s quite a nice room for your party.”

YuSung also seemed to like how the sunshine lit the classroom up brightly.

“Yes, this one’s my favorite.”

So HaeJung wrote down something on a document as he made his decision, then nodded.

“Okay, you’re free to use this room until you graduate... You really are incredible, you know. To think that a first-year student could obtain their own room when even the third-years have a difficult time doing so.”

TL/N: Korean highschool lasts for three years.

So HaeJung's words were not those of praise but admiration. Becoming a member of the Sevens as soon as he enrolled in school despite having an F-rank Trait... Leading the weakest class to victory... His prowess in the various extracurriculars he had participated in...

A student like that was a first during all of her years of teaching.

"Keep doing your best. You'll go on to do great things, I'm sure of it."

A warm atmosphere.

"Thank you, Instructor So HaeJung."

The slightest bit of pride seemed to seep through the woman's professional mask.

"...You remembered my name even though I'm not even your homeroom teacher."

She skimmed through the list of party members. "You're quite talented to boot," she remarked, fascinated. "Getting a girl as difficult as her to be a part of your team..."

She was referring to EunAh. A girl with her background, skills, and strong personality was difficult to control, even for an instructor like So HaeJung.

"And on top of that... the Representative Selection is soon, isn't it? You'll be facing off against Adela then?"

Her eyes narrowed. The topic she had just brought up was the reason why she had personally sought out YuSung instead of sending him a message on his Pocket.

"Adela is one of the students I'm in charge of."

So HaeJung smiled bitterly and took off her glasses. Even as her vision blurred, she looked directly into YuSung's eyes.

"I want you to win."

The reasons for it were complicated.

YuSung was quite accomplished. However, So HaeJung felt much more favorable towards Adela, who was one of the students she supervised. That ironically led to her wanting YuSung to beat her.

"That child is strong. If you observe her closely, however, there's something rather worrying about her..."

YuSung listened to all of this without a single word. So HaeJung relaxed at this.

"...Everything is boring to her. Like when you play a game and all of the enemies you meet are ones you've already seen before."

That was something that the current YuSung could understand. During the time the Fist King had raised him, YuSung always had something new to learn and a new opponent to face, no matter how strong he grew. In fact, the title of the strongest felt like it was growing farther away from him the more powerful he became.

Adela, however, had already lost any semblance of a goal a long time ago. She had learned of her own strength before she had obtained a purpose to strive towards.

Her flawless win record wasn't new or anything deserving of glory to her—it was just dull and boring.

So HaeJung tried to properly meet YuSung's eyes, even though she could barely see them.

"...I'm just an ordinary person, though. I don't know anything about the loneliness that a genius can experience or anything like that."

She was the type of person who often heard from others how her

expressionless mask scared other people. Just that once, however, she wished that her true feelings would reach the boy in front of her.

“If there’s one thing I know, however... it’s that she’s lonely.”

She turned her head away and smiled bitterly.

“I see,” YuSung carefully responded.

His calm reply prompted her to speak up again. “I, her instructor, can’t do anything for her.”

She turned her gaze back to YuSung (though she missed him due to having her glasses off and ended up looking at the air next to him.). “...But you can. Third in the student rankings after just the first exam... Winning in the intramurals... The double raid at the Association... You’ve even captured a villain... You haven’t failed in doing a single thing.”

So HaeJung’s expression was serious.

Adela had the potential to grow even stronger. Her genius was at the level where calling her a genius was an understatement. Her talent was, to be frank, handed down from god.

All she needed was that little push. And—as Adela’s instructor—So HaeJung made a sincere appeal to YuSung to be that push.

“It’s possible for you. No, let me rephrase. You’re the only one in Gaon who can do this.”

The boy in question smiled, bemused, at the serious topic.

“Instructor, I’m over here...”

“Oh... Is that so? Ahem! My eyes aren’t what they used to be...”

She had been saying all of this while staring at thin air all that time. So HaeJung coughed to hide her embarrassment.



Still, YuSung had received her earnestness loud and clear. The notoriously strict woman was a great instructor who looked out for the children she was in charge of—it reminded him of the Fist King.

“Yes, I’ll win,” was his energetic reply.

Of course, he wasn’t going to win solely for Adela’s sake.

Even if So HaeJung hadn’t requested this of him, he had been planning on doing his utmost to pursue the goal that he had been chasing for most of his life.

# Chapter 62

—A location with a scenic view of Gaon Academy. The room was filled with the highest-quality sofa and various other appliances. Amy was speechless at the sight.

“Th-this is a luxury good worth 10 million won. That too! Everything’s so high quality and from a designer label...”

“EunAh paid for everything.”

In contrast to her excited demeanor, YuSung’s answer was calm.

“EunAh?! Damn... at her level, I bet even the furniture must’ve cost at least a hundred million...”

“Yeah, you got it. Around 400 million.”

“Gah! F-four hundred million won?!” Amy had blown past shock and reached a stupor. “Huhhhh... I bet there isn’t a place on campus as extravagant as this room.”

YuSung nodded in assent, and fell into thought.

“It’s too much, isn’t it? Maybe it isn’t too late to get a refund for this...”

“Hiiek! No, no way in hell!” Amy fiercely shook her head. “This is the best! Especially this massage chair!”

She smiled brightly and sat on the aforementioned chair, enjoying a massage. It was odd to see a massage chair as one of the furnishings in a classroom meant to be used by students, but EunAh had been adamant about buying quite a number of items, including it.

“It’s amazing enough that a first-year managed to nab a room for their

personal use... and to think it's one of this class... I bet that none of the older students can match this! We're the first to have a room this luxurious."

Amy let out a sigh like a deflating balloon as she melted into the seat of the massage chair.



“...Mmm, this place is better than my dorm room. No, it’s much better. I wanna live here instead.”

She was so infatuated with the chair that there was drool running

down her mouth in ecstasy. Amy reached for the glass of iced coffee next to her and took a sip.

“My mind is blown. This is surely... heaven. Oh! Party Leader-nim, you should take a seat as well!”

She indicated to the chair next to her, eyes sparkling. YuSung complied and sat down.

*Rumble rumble.*

His body slowly began to melt under the incessant rhythm of the massage chair. Amy thoughtfully handed him a carton of banana-flavored milk.

“Amy, you’re right. This really is...”

As YuSung was enjoying his taste of heaven, Sumire had finished cooking in the kitchen that had been installed in their room. She brought over a plate for the two of them somewhat self-consciously.

“I-I made sandwiches since they’re easy to eat! They aren’t as delicious as the chicken you had before, but...”

Amy’s eyes grew wide.

“Whoa! You put pork cutlets in the sandwich? And you made those in the kitchen? This owns!”

—A clubroom filled with luxury goods. Sitting on a massage chair with banana-flavored milk in one hand and a pork cutlet sandwich in the other hand... Nothing was quite as relaxing or healing to YuSung as that.

“Phew, aren’t you nervous, though? Tomorrow’s the day of the Representative Selection... Adela’s going to participate!”

—A girl with a perfect win record.

Even among the students with S-rank Traits, Adela was considered the strongest among the first-years. It was natural to be worried. Amy laid down on the massage chair and began muttering to herself with a serious expression on her face.

“I’ve been hearing that Inno Academy’s representatives aren’t slouches either! Uh, hehe... I’m sure you’ll be able to defeat them with one blow, Party Leader.”

Amy looked at YuSung and wiggled her eyebrows up and down.

Like she had said, the ones chosen by their academies to participate in the Selection were all strong. YuSung didn’t care about that fact, however.

“It doesn’t matter who the opponent is.”

He was going to do his best, regardless of who he was fighting. His plan was to display every ounce of his skills to the audience to prove his strength.

YuSung had managed to unlock the fourth form of the Battle God Style. In that sense, he was at his strongest. No matter what Traits those he faced off against had, YuSung had his own weapon—one that he had polished and sharpened alongside the Fist King.

“...Because I’ll be giving it my all.”

He gave an earnest reply from his massage chair.

Amy also looked at him with an earnest look in her eyes.

“I can’t believe you said something that sounds that cool, even when the vibration from the massage chair is making your voice shake...”

For some reason, she seemed to be impressed by him.

“Seriously, do you want to try doing a collab broadcast with me? With your looks and personality, I bet...”

Sumire, who had been watching them talk to each other, picked up a sandwich of her own and insistently murmured to herself:

“I-I’ll work even harder... to not cause Shin YuSung-ssi any trouble...”

She glanced at her bare ring finger and began to let out an ominous laugh.

“Huhee...”

Even if every member of YuSung’s party had their own method of relaxing, he managed to spend a fruitful break with them the day before the Representative Selection.

\* \* \*

—The beautiful emerald sheen of El Nido’s oceans. Adela leisurely walked on the surface of the waves. Whenever she stepped onto the water, ice would form beneath her foot.

*Hsssss.*

From the depths of the ocean was something that was aiming for her. It headed its way towards the surface in her direction.

*Roooooarr!!*

An enormous spray of water spouted from a patch of water in front of her, revealing a fish the size of a whale leaping into the sky.

*Splaaaaash!!*

The identity of the building-sized monster was the rank 4 boss, Taishi. It had escaped its dungeon and into the oceans of El Nido in the Phillippines, feeding on various marine life in the area and destroying the ecosystem.

The Taishi hid itself after sinking back into the ocean; there was no clue as to when it would attack.

*Splooooosh!*

The Taishi again emerged from the ocean in a giant spray of water. One could lose their balance and fall into the depths just from the waves that it created with its massive body.

*Craaaash!*

Adela faced the oncoming waves and lazily stretched out her hand.

*Whoosh!*

A cold chill began to emanate from her hand.

*Creak!*

The waves were frozen in an instant.

In fact, both the Taishi and the ocean surrounding it had frozen like a glacier.

*Flap! Flapflap!*

The Taishi wagged its frozen tail, trying to wriggle its entire body to break free of the ice, but it was all meaningless. Adela languidly approached the monster and laid her hand on its head.

*Crack!*

And that was the end of the hunt.

The Taishi had been transformed into an enormous hunk of ice.

Adela was way too strong. After absorbing the 10,000-Year-Old Crystal, she had become even stronger than before. It was why she had never searched for a party member before.

The girl looked up at the sky with a dazed expression on her face. The sunlight glinted off the ice laid out in front of her, creating a



brehtaking sight.

But Adela didn't stop to admire the view. With an expressionless face, she entered through the portal to return back to the portal zone. Her homeroom teacher, So HaeJung, was already waiting for the girl when she arrived.

"Six minutes and 22 seconds... a new record."

"It was only a rank 4 boss."

Adela's reply was serene, even in the face of her instructor's praise.

"Taking the monster so lightly... even Association members would have a hard time dealing with it."

Even as she said so, So HaeJung knew that they were no match for the girl. Rank 4 boss monsters were strong enough to warrant a city-wide warning if one happened to appear in a city.

But Adela's opponent in the Representative Selections was YuSung. So HaeJung looked at her student with a bitter expression on her face.

"...You're thinking of going back to Italy if you win here, aren't you?"

Adela did not have an immediate answer in mind to that question.

The reason she had come to Korea in the first place was to find strong opponents and become stronger herself.

But if she defeated YuSung, there would no longer remain anyone in Korea who could be a match for her.

"I might," she eventually replied. So HaeJung nodded.

"I see... I know you aren't sure yet, but I did still think you were going to do so."

The instructor felt regret as she heard those words, but there was

nothing she could do about it. She understood the longing Adela felt more than anyone else in Gaon.

So HaeJung stood up from her seat and handed the S Class student her participation pass. She smiled.

“It won’t happen, though.”

YuSung’s victory seemed certain to her. Those resolute words caused Adela to look right at her homeroom teacher.

“...Instructor, do you think I’m going to lose at the Representative Selections?”

Her question wasn’t borne from her ego but sincere curiosity. Adela was fascinated by her certainty—no one had ever been sure she would lose before, including the woman standing before her.

“That child has something you don’t have...”

It was something So HaeJung felt instinctually, solely from the perspective of a hunter.

Hunters grew stronger as they faced their own failures, didn’t falter, and endured many trials to overcome them. One had to fall in order to learn how to stand up.

She had only talked to YuSung for a short period of time, but she could tell he had experienced those falls.

Mana refined to an extent greater than most, and a physique polished to a near-perfect sheen... She knew that regular training could never give him either of those traits—he had earned those as a result of brutal training that had pushed him over his limits.

‘The reason why he could endure such harsh training was probably because of... ’

His goal.

She didn't know what that goal was, but So HaeJung could see the yearning clearly in YuSung's eyes. It was an emotion that Adela, who had detached herself from everything, had never experienced before.

"I hope that..."

Adela placed the pass in her Pocket and walked towards the exit.

"...what you said comes to pass, Instructor."

\* \* \*

Italy. A suburb in Florence...

Two muscular old men were giving each other death glares as they sat at a weathered, old bar with a long history.

But suddenly, the mood broke, and the two broke out into wide grins. The man with silver hair began shouting uproariously.

"Perché è così tardi?!" (What took you so long?!)

"Kuhaha! It just happened like that. I enjoyed raising a disciple a lot more than I thought I would, you know!"

The man was the Fist King, who was also called the strongest hunter in the world. The person sitting on the opposite side of him was named Arden Ortensia. He began replying to the other man in fluent Korean, which had become an official language of Italy.

"...Still, not a single bit of contact for over ten years. How saddening."

Arden smiled softly while pouring brandy into his glass. Yu WonHak himself lited the brandy, bottle and all, into his mouth.

*Gulp gulp!*

He wiped his mouth and turned his gaze back to Arden.

“More importantly...! I heard that you raised your granddaughter into a real monster.”

“...Ah, Adela, you mean?”

Arden smiled sadly.

“Unfortunately... I never taught her anything at all. The basics, at most. That child was strong as soon as she was born.”

Yu WonHak poured more brandy into Arden’s empty glass and began listening attentively to the other man.

“How about I hear some praise about your granddaughter from you, then?” His face showed his interest.

“Hahaha. Don’t tell me your goal is to spy on her, you sneak!”

“Kuhaha! What a grandiose goal!” Yu WonHak laughed uproariously. “I was just curious. You know, your granddaughter and my disciple... Who’s the stronger one?”

Arden tilted his glass to his lips and took an elegant sip of the brandy, then slowly opened his mouth to speak.

“That child is a genius, plain and simple. She had complete control over her Trait when she was five.”

“Interesting. Hunters who have great Traits are a dime a dozen, though—the fact that you’re making such a big deal out of it means that there’s some other potential lying within her, right?”

Arden nodded at the man’s observation.

“Right. Like you said, there are plenty of hunters out in the world who have strong Traits, but the ability to use one’s Trait practically generally comes from experience, no?”

“Correct. All of the experience a hunter has built while on active duty

can determine if they win or lose at a crucial moment.”

The Fist King acknowledged this fact and crossed his arms, nodding his head.

Arden continued to talk, his tone serious.

“Adela never needed that experience. It felt like she knew how to do everything as soon as she was born.”

Yu WonHak’s gaze also turned serious. “...As soon as she was born?”

“Yeah. Adela easily countered an attack pattern she had never seen before without even an ounce of surprise.”

Arden smiled proudly as he recounted the story.

“She was seven when this happened. Can you even imagine that? A seven-year-old?”

The listener snorted. “That’s amazing. I’m sure she’ll be a tricky opponent... if you aren’t just bluffing.”

“...Even your disciple will have a hard time being a match for Adela,” added Arden. “That child was born to be a hunter. Even I’ve never seen talent like that before.”

“Kuhaha! We won’t know until they fight each other, won’t we? You have to see just how incredible YuSung is with your own eyes to realize that...”

Yu WonHak was trying to praise his disciple, but before he could go any further, Arden cut him off.

“No, I don’t need to see him to be certain of that fact. As soon as I saw my granddaughter, I realized that there were geniuses who were above the other geniuses.”

“Look, I’m telling you, my YuSung defeated a rank 2 monster when he

was nine years old...”

The Fist King tried once more to brag about his disciple. But Arden, already deep into the throes of praising his granddaughter, cut him off again.

“No, really. My Adela is...”

“Argh, you!”

Eventually, Yu WonHak shouted.

Even so, the two hunters, reunited after many years, nursed their drinks and talked about their granddaughter and disciple for a good, long while.

# Chapter 63

Metro City's giant stadium...

*Drrrr!!*

The ceiling roared as it closed itself over the structure, bathing the interior pitch-black. Two spotlights shone over the stadium, highlighting the stage.

*Flash! Flash! Flash!*

On the stage were the MC and the commentator. The audience cheered at the sight.

“Hello, everyone! It's me, Yu HanNah! Looks like the stadium is already heated up with anticipation for the Representative Selection!”

Skillfully completing her intro, she glanced over at Mei Lin. The other woman had an exasperated look on her face.

“...And I'm the commentator, Mei Lin.”

She wasn't a fan of getting that much attention from the public, but it wasn't something she could help. Mei Lin was, in fact, one of the most popular hunters in the entire Association.

‘If it wasn't a request from the Association president, I wouldn't have...!’

[Cool & beautiful! Goddess! Mei Lin!]

[Academy City's... wingless fairy★]

People were even holding up signs for her in the audience like the

ones you would see in idol concerts. Mei Lin's face, set in a hard grimace, showed her blatant distaste for the whole situation. Even so, her fans cheered when the camera landed on her.

“...Urgh!”

Mei Lin quickly turned her head away, face flushed red with embarrassment.

Yu HanNah smoothly continued the proceedings.

“Okay, everyone. Before we show you all the students and the results of the preliminary votings, we'll explain the rules of the Selection as well as how broadcasting it will work!”

Flash!

A detailed explanation appeared on the screen.

### **[Rules and Things to Know]**

- 1. Participants are allowed to use any kind of strategy possible.**
- 2. When a participant has accumulated enough damage to be considered disqualified, they will be ejected out of the portal.**
- 3. The portal is connected to an artificial space created using mana. (Don't worry, any wounds inflicted on students do not affect their real bodies!★)**
- 4. Up to three artifacts and hunter gears may be in possession at a time in one's Pockets.**
- 5. Any supporters' messages will be censored as needed by the event organizers. (Let's keep the competition fair and equal for all!)**

“And in the case that you want to keep watching a certain student you're rooting for, turn your eyes from the official broadcast towards



the individual broadcasts hosted by their supporters!”

The broadcasting rights that Amy had wanted so dearly were used for said individual broadcasts.

The more popular the student one supported, the higher the viewership would obviously be for the broadcast. YuSung and Adela were rather sought-out students in that regard.

“Now, then! The moment you’ve all been waiting for! We will show you the results of our preliminary votes!”

**1st – Adela Ortensia (43%)**

**2nd – Shin YuSung (39%)**

**3rd – Na JiHye (7%)**



An overwhelming difference.

The results of the vote were functionally meaningless, seeing as the selections hadn't even started yet. Even so, one could tell that YuSung

and Adela were incredibly popular.

“As expected, our first and second-place students are Adela and Shin YuSung, both hailing from Gaon Academy! Gaon is famous for being a top-class school. Our third-place student is Na JiHye from Inno Academy!”

So ended Yu HanNah’s explanation. Mei Lin slowly opened her mouth.

“...Preliminary votings are just that: preliminary. Whether these students will reach the finals is a different story.”

Despite saying that, she had already decided in her heart that the finalists would be YuSung and Adela.

‘Taking the skill levels of the participants into consideration, the finals are near-guaranteed to be a fight between those two.’

Therefore, her words were said only out of courtesy.

A seasoned veteran, Yu HanNah quickly picked up the thread Mei Lin had left behind.

“True enough! Even if you weren’t ranked in the preliminary vote, don’t give up! There’s no telling what the results of the competition will be, nor how the final vote will turn out!”

The explanation ended there. As it did so, the rest of the lights turned on, revealing the students that had been hidden in the darkness.

—The top student of her year at Gaon, Adela.

—The disciple of the Fist King, Shin YuSung.

—Na JiHye of Inno Academy, as well. The students were lined up neatly according to the number of votes they had received in the preliminary polls.

YuSung looked at the tens of thousands of people sitting in the stands

—every seat was filled to the brim.

‘...So this is the Representative Selection,’ he pondered.

YuSung had shown great results in both the Association’s dungeon raid competition and in his extracurriculars.

The selections, however, were on a completely different scale. It was a national event enjoyed by people all around the country—an event that would decide a sole party leader to represent the country and prove Korea’s might to the world.

‘...I’m sure that Master is watching me.’

The Fist King was the person who had emphasized the importance of the International Competition above all. It was a place to fight strong people from all over the world—a great opportunity for one to get stronger. It was one that YuSung, who was aiming to become the strongest hunter in the world, couldn’t miss.

‘I won’t be able to look him in the eyes if I manage to lose *here*.’

YuSung smiled in a carefree manner as he thought that. Compared to his goal, it was nothing but the starting line.

– Whoaaaaa!

Cheers spilled over from the audience as the cameras captured YuSung’s smile. Yu HanNah, as the MC, watched it happen proudly.

‘He really is popular.’

As proof, the ratings were shooting up.

Korea’s Selections were rather popular on their own, considering the fact that the country was considered one of the top producers of hunters in the world. Of course, the participants that the viewers were interested in most were by and far Adela and YuSung.

—Adela, with an unmarred win streak.

—YuSung, the disciple of the Fist King.

Even if they were students, their names held incredible value.

‘It’ll be interesting no matter who wins. For the narrative, though... I’m sure that it’ll be better if the native Korean contestant wins.’

Yu HanNah finished the calculations in her head.

“Now!” she cried with an exuberant grin, “We will begin the Representative Selection!”

The students entered the portal one by one amidst the crowd’s cheers and applause.

\* \* \*

A neatly organized desk...

Shin HaYoon, the president-elect, was watching a broadcast of the Representative Selection, posture relaxed. Her fingers were loosely tented.

“...Hmm.”

She laughed with her eyes narrowed as if finding something amusing. Lee Hyuk found that side of her unfamiliar.

“This is the first time I’ve seen you take so much interest in a first-year student.”

“Ah, yes. I know him from way back.”

Even as he was talking, HaYoon’s gaze was locked on YuSung, who was being displayed on the screen.

Lee Hyuk couldn’t figure out just how an orphan and someone from

the Shin-oh family would ever have the opportunity to meet each other.

The only point of similarity they had was that they had the same surname.

“...I wonder,” muttered HaYoon, in her usual, cold tone.

“Who will the winner be?”

“No.”

HaYoon had a hard time holding in her laughter. It truly was an amusing scenario she was observing.

“Whatever it is, looks like you’re having fun with it,” replied Lee Hyuk.

Curious as to what he meant, she checked her reflection in a nearby mirror.

“Ah.”

The corner of her mouth had tilted up without her noticing. HaYoon lightly bit her lip, only to let the rest of her bright grin spread across her face.

“I guess I was looking forward to this too much.”

She was not talking about the winner of the Selection. In fact, what she was referring to was the reaction of the prideful head of the Shin-oh clan, her own father.

‘...Will the clan head finally admit that he had judged wrongly?’

If YuSung emerged victorious in the selection, the clan head’s judgement would be put under question by the members of his own family—that much was inevitable.

The fact that he had personally thrown away an unpolished gem valuable enough to be picked as the representative of Korea...

The fact that he didn't have the skills to polish the gem in the first place, unlike the Fist King...

'If it really were to happen, I'm sure that there would be at least one person tripping over themselves to bring YuSung up to him.'

HaYoon seemed to enjoy the idea of the trouble it would bring, despite the fact that it would affect her family and her father.

Lee Hyuk, not knowing anything about the situation, simply nodded at her comment.

"I've heard bits and pieces about what they've accomplished so far. I'm looking forwards to this event as well."

"...That so? Good to hear. Shall we watch the broadcast together?"

HaYoon began clearing the documents off her desk as she said so. Lee Hyuk sighed, exasperated.

"Fine. Just two hours, though, there's something planned in a bit..."

"Sure," she acquiesced.

That was plenty of time for HaYoon, who had already exceeded the strength of her instructors, to measure YuSung's skills.

\* \* \*

—Densely-cropped trees.

—A green forest, filled to the brim with tiny, frolicking animals.

The location that YuSung had arrived in after entering the portal was some sort of mountain.

‘...This is all fake?’

Even the smells and sounds felt realistic, giving off an authentic experience. It was, however, an artificial space created with mana for the selection. Thanks to its existence, any fatal wound would simply eject the participant out of the portal—the person’s body would suffer no harm.

‘Amazing.’

While YuSung was standing there, impressed at the technology the Association possessed, a blue hologram appeared from his Pocket.

**[We will start giving you information regarding the Representative Selection.]**

**[Chosen map – Sarnia Island]**

**[Starting Area – Mount Sarnia]**

**[Participants start at random locations. Use all methods at hand to survive until only two of you are left.]**

“Perfect.”

Amy had already given YuSung the explanation regarding the Selection. Thankfully, Sarnia Island was one of the maps that he had the chance to study beforehand.

*Flash!*

**[Amy♥: oho, sarnia! nice, nice! i remember pretty much everything there is to know about this place! ♡(◡ ◡)₃]**

**[Amy♥: hmm, and if you’re starting on the mountain, generally the best move to make is to follow the mountain ridge and get a good view of the area.]**

Good things give you more joy if they are shared with other people.



Amy, who had been watching along, sent him a message in excitement.

“No, I have my own idea.”

But YuSung didn’t need her plan. He quickly crouched down and placed his palm on the soil. Then, using his Trait, he heightened his concentration to the utmost.

– *Step. Step.*

He could feel the vibrations through his fingertips.

Then he used his ears to listen to the tiniest of sounds as if they were being produced right next to him.

– “Ugh, which way’s the creek?”

– “It’s gotta be below here somewhere.”

‘So they’re looking for a stream.’

He didn’t know who the owner of the voice was, but the actions they were taking were logical. If they moved through the shallow stream of water, they could erase all traces of their footprints, making it harder for their opponents to track them.

On top of that, Sarnia Island’s creeks had one characteristic: they all led to a village. Thus, another benefit to following one was that one could find the village without getting lost.

‘Judging by the direction... ’

YuSung predicted which route his opponent would take and hid himself behind an appropriate tree. Just as he did, his opponent began heading in his direction, cutting a path through the foliage.

“Ugh, why did they even make the bugs realistic here? I can smell animal poop, too...”

They were complaining loudly at their supporter. Their actions were much too casual and had a high chance of broadcasting their location to their enemies.

‘A boy. Just one.’

The closer the other boy got, the quieter YuSung breathed, erasing all traces of his presence. And right when his opponent was about to pass by him...

“Dunno, to look good, I guess. Since it’s broadcasted, a bunch of people will see me, too... Urk!”

He struck the boy in the neck with a knifehand strike.

*Thud!*

The poor guy immediately lost consciousness from YuSung’s clean blow. A hologram appeared from YuSung’s Pocket right after.

**[Yoon MoonBok from YooSeon Academy has fainted.]**

**[Recovery determined to be impossible. Disqualified.]**

**[163 people are left.]**

*Flash!*

The hologram disappeared. The male student turned into blue pixels; then also vanished—like dust in the wind.

YuSung watched it all happen, amazed. ‘So that’s how the disqualified are taken care of.’

Similarly, Amy was also amazed by YuSung’s skills.

**[Amy♥: party leader-nim...? you already disqualified someone... how...? it hasn’t even been a minute yet...]**

Amy realized yet again that YuSung was incomprehensibly strong.

# Chapter 64

The broadcasting booth that the Association had prepared...

Amy finished her preparations and began her broadcast. Her live viewership count was growing at an astonishing rate.

“Heh heh! Welcome, everyone! You’re all here to watch Mr. Party Leader, aren’t you?!”

Amy cheerfully greeted her viewers, who began sending her donations as if they had been waiting to do so.

**[Konde donates 300,000 won!]**

TL/N: Possibly a reference to Kondetv, a Korean sports Youtuber. Equivalent to around 300 dollars.

**– You’re one of the main Selection broadcasters, Amy? As expected of a Gaon student~!**

**[Aim-chan donates 1,500,000 won!]**

**– How’d you grab Shin YuSung?!**

**[alessioago33 donates 5,000 won!]**

**– ※Adela vince comunque.**

Hurrah for capitalism.

“Oh, right!” Amy’s eyes shone as she began appealing to her viewers through her integrity. “For the record, half of my donations will go directly to Party Leader-nim! Hehe, feel free to keep ‘em coming for the sake of our party’s infinite growth! Hehehe...”

Amy checked the chat messages, in a good mood from all of the donations.

**[alessioago33 donates 5,000 won!]**

**– Adela is Italian. She will beat Shin YuSung and win.**

An Italian fan had purposefully visited YuSung’s broadcast to cheer for Adela. Amy kicked them out and directed her audience to watch the screen.

“Hey, hey, everyone, watch this! Mr. Party Leader over here is going to do something... huh?”

YuSung suddenly hid behind a tree. Amy’s eyes twinkled as she sensed that something interesting was about to happen.

“Oooh! Hey, guys, I think there’s an enemy here! He’s hiding, so... an ambush?!”

Both she and her viewers watched the scene unfurl with bated breath.

– How can he even tell?

– Vibrations from the ground? LOL

– lmaooooo, there’s no way

The messages kept pouring in, maintaining the tension.

Right then, YuSung took out his opponent in one shot with his bare hands—no weapons or Skills were used.

“Heeeeee?! Wh-what was that?!”

Amy’s eyes were fluttering, mouth wide open in shock at the scene.

– ?? With just his hand?

– how tf, kek

– Poor guy, disqualified as soon as the competition began. ;\_;

Her viewers were also surprised at what they had just seen.

Amy gulped. ‘Is... is Party Leader-nim really stronger than Adela?’

After her decisive loss against the S Class girl, Adela had become the embodiment of fear to Amy. But by the looks of it, YuSung had a chance of beating her.

\* \* \*

His 12 years of experience living on martial Spirits’ Mountain...

YuSung was showing off the knowledge he had acquired during that time with wild abandon.

‘Traces of people walking past here.’

He used which direction the blades of grass were bent towards to deduce where his opponents were heading and used the size of the footprints to deduce just how many of them there were.

‘Two people went this way. There aren’t any traces of a fight... they may have formed a pair... in that case... ’

YuSung quieted his breathing and slowly followed the tracks. The more he walked, the closer he approached his opponents, and the louder their voices became.

‘Is this really fine, though? It feels kind of cowardly to hide the entire time.’

‘They said we could use any method we wanted. This is also a strategy, you know.’

‘Mmm... I suppose we were pretty lucky, and we even started off in

the same location... I guess we should use it to our advantage.”

A male and a female student. Judging by their uniforms, both from the same academy. YuSung hid his presence and glanced at the two from afar, a faint smile on his face.

‘They aren’t wrong. Forming a pair is also a strategy.’

YuSung pulled out a fistful of grass and scattered it into the air—he was checking which direction the wind was blowing.

‘Luckily, it’s blowing towards my opponents.’

YuSung opened his Pocket to retrieve an item he had prepared beforehand.

### **[Pocket Inventory List]**

**1 – Black Dragon’s Hide [Artifact]**

**2 – Mana-powered Smoke Grenade [Hunter Gear]**

**3 – Mana-powered Firebomb [Hunter Gear]**

YuSung was only allowed to fit three items in his Pocket. He took out the smoke grenade and pumped mana into it.

*Psh! Pshhhh!*

Immediately, a loud, hissing sound began to emanate from it as smoke began to appear from the ball. YuSung ran around to the opposite side.

“The hell, is that a sneak attack?”

“Th-the smoke’s getting closer!”

While the two were preoccupied with the smoke. YuSung had reached the opposite side and began his actual sneak attack.

*Thwack!*

His first target was the neck of the female student. The male student quickly turned his head towards YuSung, just in time for it to be squarely kicked by his foot. The two dissipated into blue pixels.

**[144 people are left.]**

YuSung scanned his surroundings with a dispassionate expression.

‘I should probably leave this place before the smoke spreads even further.’

YuSung was trying to find a location where those trying to survive would gather.

**[Amy♥: hey! party leader-nim! it looks like the losers left behind some items.]**

YuSung, who was just about to leave, read her message and double-checked the area.

There...

The hunter gear that the students had prepared was lying on the ground, right over the spot where they had disappeared. Only two items had been dropped, even though he was fairly certain that was the first time they had fought and thus had not used any yet. It seemed to be that there was a possibility for a certain number of items to drop.

‘...I’ll just take what I need, then.’

As YuSung stared at the items, a hologram appeared and displayed info on them.

**[Drop List]**

**1 – Scarlet Dagger [Hunter Gear]**



## 2 – Capturing Chain [Hunter Gear]

## 3 – Mana-powered Electric Bead [Hunter Gear]

YuSung could only store three times in his Pocket. Even so, it didn't look like there was anything useful enough for him to bother taking with him.

‘The Electric Bead, I guess?’

YuSung placed the gear in his Pocket. Right as he did so, a message appeared from Amy.

**[Amy♥: my party leader whom i deeply respect!]**

**[Amy♥: your loyal supporter has once again found some incredible info to tell you! ٩(\*❏√❏\*)?]**

For whatever reason, she seemed to be ecstatic. YuSung himself smiled without noticing as he checked the rest of the message's contents.

**[Amy♥: statistically, most of the participants gather around in the middle of the map and hang around in the outskirts!]**

**[Amy♥: so, so! we should find them quickly and...! (٩•̀\_•́)٩]**

She was saying that he should increase the number of disqualified participants.

The information she gave was quite useful to YuSung.

Unlike the two he had just taken out, his goal wasn't just to place high during the competition. His only goal was victory. And even if he made it to the finals, he needed to show the audience a great performance if he wanted to win in the voting portion.

He agreed to the proposal. “Sounds good. As it happens, I can follow the river and it'll lead me to a village. How about we start from the

closest outskirts?”

**[Amy♥: kk, let's do that! i believe in you and you only, party leader-nim!]**

Amy's loyalty towards her partner could be felt through the words typed on the screen.

\* \* \*

F Class, who were all watching the Representative Selection, was practically in a celebratory mood.

“YuSung already knocked people out!”

“And all with one blow!”

“Insane. How is he so strong without even using his Trait?”

The entire class had gathered together to watch the broadcast.

Lee SiWoo began handing out inflatable cheering sticks.

“Tsk, tsk~ how dare you guys cheer YuSung on with nothing but your bare hands?”

“...Wow,” Renia said, staring at the stick-shaped balloons in her hands. “You even prepared something like this?”

Lee SiWoo preened. “Everyone, grab a pair and cheer YuSung on.”

He made his way to the snack corner to grab some popcorn. Right after, however, he turned his head here and there, as if he had discovered something odd.

“Huh? Hey, Renia.”

“Shut up, something important's happening. YuSung is breathing in some air right now.”

“No, uh, have you seen Sumire around?”

“Huh? Now that you mention it...”

Only then did Renia look away from the screen. She stretched her neck out and scanned the area, but the girl was nowhere to be found.

“Hmm, she’s not the sort of person who’d miss this,” SiWoo remarked, a worried expression on his face. He complained about Sumire a lot, but even he seemed to worry about his fellow party member when she was nowhere to be seen.

“Just where did she go?”

\* \* \*

Sumire was at her dorm.

Specifically, the most luxurious dorms in the school, reserved only for the Sevens. She had recently sat on the sofa and began adjusting a screen.

‘If I go in here and write Amy-ssi’s name... ’

*Flash!*

The screen display changed as soon as she finished inputting the name. Sumire had wanted to watch Amy’s individual broadcast, not the official one.

“Ah! Sh-Shin YuSung-ssi!”

Her heart thumped as she stared at the screen. The latter showed the accomplishments of all participants, but the former focused solely on YuSung. That difference was quite important to Sumire.

“Ah, huhuhu...” she laughed creepily. She was holding the cheering sticks in her hands.

Sumire seemed to be content just by being able to see the boy.

Right then, a school-wide announcement rang throughout the campus.

[Check, one, two! This is the headmaster, Jin ByungCheol. To the first-years, your classes have ended early so that you can watch the Selections, so please do so. Also, whoever was given the password pad to sparring arena #3, please return it posthaste.]

Sumire stopped swinging her batons and began listening in on the announcement.

[This is Instructor Lin Xiao. First-year C Class, please return the passport pad for sparring arena #3, return it immediately. And guys, cheer for YuSung, got it... Argh!]

[This is Instructor So HaeJung. Please ignore Instructor Lin Xiao's biased words, and cheer equally as much for S Class's Adela. That is all.]

“Uh...”

Sumire firmly gripped her cheering sticks once more. And at that moment, YuSung defeated two more in an instant.

“Ah, Sh-Shin YuSung-ssi!”

*Glow—*

Sumire's expression became brighter and cheerful. Self-conscious, she quickly glanced around, despite the fact that the area was empty of all other people.

Seeing that, she gained some newfound courage.

“Yu... Yu... YuSung-ssi! Good luck! Keep on fighting!”

Of course, the only way it had manifested was in her dropping his surname when referring to him. Even so, Sumire was more proud of

herself than she had ever been before, as if she had done something monumental.

Left Baton: F Class's Pride and Joy

Right Baton: Shin YuSung



# Chapter 65

Korea, known as the top country in producing hunters...

Gaon Academy, which always claimed to be built on a meritocracy based on skill, had always maintained its place as first in the country, even when the competition was quite fierce.

“No matter how great you guys are, though~ if they keep singing your praises, the rest of us just look like fodder. Don’t you think so?”

Inno Academy’s Na JiHye. She had honed her skills for that day. She said that with her hands on her hip, her posture screaming confidence.

“This is why we prepared all of this for you! Haha! First is you, Adela. Next, Shin YuSung!”

*Rush!*

Eleven students surrounded Adela.

The girl in question scanned her surroundings, expressionless. The fact that those people were participating in the Selection meant that they were the top students from their respective academies.

“What, wanna surrender?” asked JiHye with a proud look on her face.

Adela slowly opened her mouth.

“...Just because there are more of you doesn’t mean anything will change.”

“You conceited little...”

One male student grimaced and made a motion to lunge at her. JiHye

grabbed his clothes and pulled him back.

“Idiot, don’t fall for it.”

He froze on the spot, even though the girl holding him back was small in stature. JiHye seemed to be the leader of the Anti-Gaon Alliance.

“Hmph! you sure sound confident, don’t you? Against eleven people, no less!”

JiHye drew a line in the air with her finger. Suddenly, a yellow-colored barrier encased Adela. Inescapable, and cube-shaped. The girl had opted to trap her opponent instead of using it to protect herself.

“Ready!”

At JiHye’s thunderous cry, all of the students prepared their strongest attacks.

—A lit bomb.

—A drawn bow.

—Fire created through their Trait.

—A gigantic mace attached to a steel chain.

Even a glancing blow from any of those would prove fatal.

JiHye laughed confidently.

“Fuha! Do you have any idea just how much we prepared in order to defeat you?”

The Anti-Gaon Alliance practiced for three hours every day at the sparring arena.

Every student was from a different academy, and some had to take the subway to meet up because they couldn’t afford a portal. Even so, the



thought of defeating Adela motivated them all.

They had practiced the timing of that attack for a month.

“Fire!”

JiHye lowered her hand. As she did so, all of the prepared attacks flew towards Adela in unison.

*Woosh.*

The stronger a technique, the more time a hunter needed to pull it off. That was not the case for Adela. One of her talents was exceptional mana control. The reason why JiHye had used her barrier to buy time was to give the others time to charge their own attacks, creating an equal playing field in that regard.

“You can’t dodge this!”

*Flash!*

The barrier imprisoning Adela disappeared. All that was left encasing her were the myriad of attacks, threatening her from all directions.

“Everyone’s attacks are...”

Adela stretched out her hand.

Her expressionless face, staring at JiHye, seemed to vaguely be marred with contempt.

“Meaningless.”

*Clench!*

Adela squeezed her fist, grabbing thin air.

*Boom!*

The white mana exploding from her body consumed every single object in her vicinity.

*Woosh.*

The white smoke cleared, revealing an otherworldly scene before everyone's eyes. The green vegetation was completely cloaked in ice, and the attacks of her opponents were frozen in mid-air.

"H-huh?"

*Blink blink.*

JiHye stared at Adela and gulped.

"...This wasn't supposed to happen."

Their ultimate attack had been blocked.

The eleven students, seeing what had happened, abandoned each other and began running for the hills.

"The fuck..."

"H-how are we supposed to win against that?"

"I'm done with this!"

However, Adela did not let them escape as they pleased.

*Freeze!!*

Chilly air enveloped the area in an instant, freezing the ground. Excepting JiHye, who used barriers, everyone's feet were stuck to the ground.

"U-ugh!"

“I can’t lift my legs!”

“Do something!”

Adela stood atop her garden of pandemonium. With a wave of her hand, she gestured at the scene, as if telling JiHye to look.

“...The strong do not form groups.”

The girl’s empty eyes were particularly aggravating to JiHye at that moment.

“Uu, uuu...”

“No need for that.”

\* \* \*

She had finished talking for the moment. Adela lowered a single finger.

*Woosh! Stab!*

A shard of ice that had been stuck to the ground shot through the air and pierced a student.

“Urk!”

They immediately dispersed into blue pixels.

In that artificial world, all of the senses were recreated to mimic real life, including pain. The students, still stuck to the ground, began to tremble in terror.

“I-I give! I forfeit!”

“Me too, me too! I forfeit!”

“Kyaa! Me too! Quick!”

**[21 people are left.]**

The students were ejected out of the portal after forfeiting.

Adela stared at her hands with the same empty gaze. Even though she had only lowered one finger, every single student had disappeared except for Na JiHye.

“So it’s just you left.”

Adela stared at her blankly.

JiHye had erected a barrier in order to protect herself. Her hands were shaking.

‘...I already knew Adela was strong.’

It was impossible for her not to know. JiHye had admired the girl ever since she was young. She watched her every move, including the raid that she had participated in Italy when she was nine years old with other hunters, as well as the girl’s entrance exam for Gaon Academy.

The reason JiHye had been able to reach the Representative Selection was because Adela was her goal.

But still, they were worlds apart. Adela had an oppressive strength to her that couldn’t merely be labelled ‘talent’.

*Step, step.*

“I remember now... You are... The person from back then who told me that you wanted to be my rival.”

“Y-you...”

JiHye had said that to the other girl in a fit of anger during an extracurricular. Now, however, she seemed happy that Adela had

remembered her. Her nose was flushed red.

“...Remembered that?”

Adela couldn't help but remember—JiHye was the first person who had ever called her a rival, after all.

Her own reaction was quite different.

“Very well, I will treat you like a rival, then... Just how long will you last?”

The hairs on JiHye's body stood on their ends as Adela said those words.

“Hieek...”

As soon as she breathed out, a white mist formed from her mouth.

A chilling feeling swept below her feet; only then did JiHye realize that something was wrong.

*Crack.*

The chill slowly crept up, freezing her legs.

‘It... broke through my barrier... ’

JiHye didn't want to admit defeat, but she had no choice. She opened her mouth.

“I f... for... f...”

But it was too late. The words couldn't leave her mouth.

As JiHye's hands froze over—

*Shatter!*

—the mana in them maintaining the barrier could be maintained no longer. It fractured, then shattered into many pieces, like glass.

*Woosh!*

The chilly air rushed towards JiHye with the strength of a blizzard.

Adela approached the ice statue that was formerly human and poked its forehead with a single finger.

*Crack!*

JiHye's head fell onto the ground as the rest of her crumbled. While she couldn't feel it happening to her, as there was no feeling left in her body, her eyes were still cruelly functional.

‘...As I thought, it was impossible.’



JiHye soon turned into blue pixels and vanished like the others. Adela had managed to retire twelve students at once.

**[The number of participants remaining has been reduced to 20.]**

**The next event will now begin.]**

A hologram began to display itself from her Pocket, showing instructions.

*Brbrbrbrbr!*

With a bone-chilling earthquake that shook the entire map, a portion of the island disappeared.

**[A portion of the map has been deleted to match the reduced number of participants.]**

**[The locked hidden event (Token Scramble) will now begin.]**

**[Those who manage to obtain a token from the boss monsters will move onto the finals.]**

The location of the boss monsters was displayed on the participants' Pockets, including Adela's.

**[Mount Sarnia – ??? (Rank 4)]**

**[Sarnia Cave – ??? (Rank 4)]**

The location Adela chose to go to was the cave that was near the grasslands where she was at. The lengthy Selection was drawing to a close.

\* \* \*

**[Mount Sarnia – ??? (Rank 4)]**

**[Sarnia Cave – ??? (Rank 4)]**

A sudden hidden event began.

YuSung was checking the information on the hologram. At the same moment, Amy was making a fuss through her texts.



**[Amy♥: whoaa! this owns!]**

**[Amy♥: boss monsters! tokens! this is a super rare event! hehe, if i do some rough calculations... around every 5 years or so?]**

“Is that so?” remarked YuSung, who was moving up to higher ground. Based on the information Amy had fed him, he already knew that participants would be chosen to move up to the finals based on survival. The Association had, however, begun a hidden event.

**[Amy♥: hmm, let's say that, usually, two people are more~ than strong enough to defeat a rank 4 together. Keep that in mind and proceed!]**

YuSung nodded, understanding what she was getting at. The Selection had another goal, other than to choose a representative... It was to show off the nation's power

This hidden event seemed to be an extension of the latter.

‘It probably won't be a big deal.’

The two who earned a token from the boss monsters would eventually be pitted against each other in the finals to choose a winner amongst them. Even if one managed to obtain that token through luck and cowardly tactics, they would get weeded out by the voting phase.

Essentially, all he had to worry about was not having the boss monster he was chasing down overlap with someone else.

Curious, Amy shot YuSung a message.

**[Amy♥: so, party leader-nim, which are you going to go to? the cave or the mountain?]**

“Hmm...”

He pondered over the answer. But only for a moment.

YuSung was next to the river, which was very close to Mount Sarnia.

“The mountain would be best for sure since it’s nearer.”

The destination had already been chosen for him.

# Chapter 66

Deep in the forests of Mount Sarnia...

His entire body felt damp just from walking through the foggy air.

‘I can barely see anything...’

But Lee SeokHoon couldn’t give up. No matter how good his grades were, he was from an American academy, not from a prestigious academy like Gaon or Inno.

But he was currently in the top 20.

He would have never been that successful, normally. Of course, his goal wasn’t to win. SeokHoon would be satisfied if he could use the opportunity granted to him to make some sort of impression on the viewers.

‘I bet noona will put me in the guild if I do well here.’

He searched for traces of the boss monster with an excited look on his face.

Right then, SeokHoon heard the harsh breathing of a creature from behind him.

“Grr...”

It sounded like the growl of a large beast, much like a tiger. He quickly turned his head towards the direction of the sound but saw nothing.

“Wh-what?!”

“Roar!”

Another cry. At the same moment, something clawed SeokHoon’s arm.

*Scratch!*

“Argh! Urk!”

It was impossible.

A wound had appeared on his arm, even though he couldn’t see anything in the area. To add to that, SeokHoon swore he could feel the wind pressure of something running towards him.

His opponent was there, but he couldn’t see it.

“N-no way...”

*Flash!*

A hologram appeared from SeokHoon’s Pocket at the same time he had his distressing premonition.

**[Participant Lee SeokHoon has found the boss monster, King of the Mountain.]**

**[The location of the King of the Mountain will be marked to all participants.]**

“D-damn... shit. The King of the Mountain?”

*Flash!*

SeokHoon ran away as if possessed. The name ‘King of the Mountain’ was a monicker that the Korean Hunters’ Association had attached to that particular boss monster. Its real name was the Hwanbiho—a tiger that could use magic like the ones in Korean legends.

The spell that made its body invisible was the hardest to deal with.

“Those damn Association members! Just how are we supposed to defeat this thing without any preparation?”

It was common knowledge and practice to prepare hunter gear in order to defeat specific bosses. For example, if one bought some marking powder from the supply shop and spread it in the air, they could uncover the King of the Mountain.

“Gasp, gasp... gasp...”

SeokHoon had been running for a while. His breathing was ragged and came out in short bursts from his mad sprint.

“Did I... lose it?”

He lowered his head to gather his breath for a moment. As he did, he heard the sound of leaves rustling.

*Crunch.*

SeokHoon broke out in a cold sweat as he turned his head towards the direction of the noise. Still, he couldn't see anything.

“Grrr...”

The last thing he remembered was the beast growling right in front of his face.

\* \* \*

The luxurious Sunsung group's mansion...

EunAh and Lee SuHyun were watching the official broadcast together while amicably sitting on the sofa next to each other.

The broadcast was, at that time, focused on the appearance of the rank 4 boss monster, the King of the Mountain.

“Aargh, that idiot!” yelled SuHyun as she watched SeokHoon be

mercilessly disqualified on air. “Can’t a hunter at least hold his darn breath?”

She began pounding her chest in frustration. EunAh turned a disdainful gaze towards her.

‘...Dammit, she’s loud as hell.’



Even if she wanted to complain about it to the other woman, though, there was something scary about her attitude.

SuHyun kept yelling, her anger lit aflame. “You should’ve run away no

matter what it took or scooped up some mud and thrown it! If it were me, I would've done anything during the competition!"

EunAh subtly distanced herself from the furious woman.

"Hes uh... your little brother, right?" she asked timidly.

"Yes, he is," she responded, her anger still not sated. "Haah, really. That moron. I told him a million times to keep his head screwed on tight during the raid! But he just won't listen to me..."

She looked terrifying as she kept muttering to herself.

"Next time I see him, I'm gonna have to punt his head off!"

EunAH felt as if SuHyun wasn't joking. She was a high-level hunter who could even beat rank 5 boss monsters.

"That... h-he can make a mistake every once in a while... you don't have to kick his head off or anything for it, right?"

She coughed in an exaggerated manner as if the idea bothered her, but SuHyun's voice was cold when she replied.

"Even so, I've told him this multiple times already!"

"Th-that so?"

EunAh felt like she finally got to see what SuHyun's actual personality was like.

"If he doesn't listen to you, beat him up and he will—all little brothers are like this."

The older woman's eyes narrowed as she looked at EunAh.

"Besides, isn't it better for me to beat him up and for him to properly learn his lesson rather than him dying a dog's death in a dungeon because he couldn't?"



“Well, uh... yes?”

“Sigh. So I’ve been *saying*,” she grumbled, “he should’ve at least tried to throw something at the invisible monster. He would’ve had a chance if he even managed to get some mud on it!”

SuHyun was still muttering to herself, anger plain on her face. EunAh resolved to try and cool the other woman off.

“Still, your little brother did his best... And he got into the top 20.”

“...Huh?”

SuHyun’s expression changed to one of incredible shock as she heard EunAh attempt to give her her own form of consolation.

EunAh had been the sort of person who would say things like, “anything other than first place is meaningless”, or “people without talent should just give up”. The girl would never have said something like that before.

“...Why are you staring at my face like that? What’s so interesting about it?”

EunAh scrunched up her face, not knowing what was going on in SuHyun’s mind. The older woman had a proud expression on her face.

“You’ve changed.”

“I have?”

“Yes, quite a bit.”

SuHyun was quite sharp, unlike an inexperienced student like EunAh. She, at least, understood why the prickly girl’s attitude was changing. In fact, it would have been weird if she didn’t.

YuSung had saved Kim JunHyuk, whom EunAh treasured more than her own life.

‘I was so confused when I heard that he carried her on his back and brought her to her brother’s hospital bed, but now... ’

There wasn’t even a need to deduce what was going on—that’s how obvious it was. All of the puzzle pieces were clicking into place.

The reason why EunAh hemmed and hawed over the message she was going to send him and why she decided to watch the Representative Selection that she previously didn’t have any interest in...

YuSung was that sole reason. Whether it was her feelings towards him as her comrade or something else, that fact was plain to see.

“Huh? I haven’t changed a bit.”

Of course, the person in question was in denial.

– No need.

But as soon as EunAH heard YuSung’s voice from the broadcast, her head instinctively turned towards the screen.

‘She’s even reacting to his voice now.’

The image SuHyun had of EunAh was changing more and more as she watched the girl. If she had to describe it...

‘...She’s turning from a cat into a dog?’

If President Kim SeokHan knew what she was thinking, he would have had a heart attack. She didn’t care too much about that, though. SuHyun was the person who wished for the change to happen in EunAh more than anyone.

And if some sort of problem were to arise...

‘I’ll just quit the job before anything happens.’

SuHyun’s mouth quirked upwards as she observed EunAh, who was

focused on the broadcast.

\* \* \*

**[Amy♥: the boss monster happens to be the king of the mountain, of all things... as i thought, it'll be best to go to the village to farm gear, right?]**

**[Amy♥: there'll be a bunch of items left behind by disqualified participants too!]**

His supporter's, Amy's, message was clear. It was common practice for one to prepare as much as they could against an opponent they could not see.

But YuSung ignored the hologram and continued to climb the mountain towards the boss.

"No, I'm going to proceed as planned."

A moment of silence.

**[Amy♥: ( ' . ㅅ . ');; party leader-nim? the opponent is invisible, y'know?!]**

"It'll be fine."

YuSung stayed adamant, even when Amy sent him another message to confirm his intentions.

There was no need to lengthen the time needed to hunt the King of the Mountain if he could pinpoint its location without using any hunter gear.

'I don't need to rely on my sight, after all.'

The cave on Martial Spirits' Mountain...

YuSung had once fought in its pitch-black depths in order to surpass

the limits of his five senses.

The reason he underwent that training was because of the mysterious Tower.

‘Master passed the Tower’s trial in an environment with no sound or light.’

That was due to the Fist King’s meticulous preparations. Those who were prepared could pass the trial, but those who weren’t would meet with nothing but death.

This was why the man constantly plied training upon YuSung when the boy was already plenty powerful.

—In order to surpass the limit of having an F-rank Trait.

—To surpass the limit of one’s body.

—And even surpass the limits of one’s five senses. Everything was poured into YuSung’s training.

At first, the Fist King’s goal with the boy had been to reach the top of the Tower, a resolute goal for humanity, through his disciple. But in the twelve years he spent teaching him, he had changed.

YuSung had changed into ‘something’ other than just a disciple to the Fist King, who had no child of his own.

Still, his will was passed on.

Even when Yu WonHak, not anyone else, pressured YuSung to reach the top of the tower, it had become one of his goals.

**[You have reached the location in which the boss monster appeared. The navigation will now end.]**

**[Amy♥: 🐼🐼🐼 be careful, party leader-nim! you’re in the king of the mountain’s territory now!]**

After checking the message, YuSung began enhancing his senses. In moments like those, his Trait, [Heightened Focus], displayed strength that surpassed its limits.

The sense he chose to focus on was his hearing.

*Whoosh.*

The sound of the wind blowing between the blades of grass...

The chirps of the birds living on the mountain...

The scurrying feet of small critters...

YuSung's heightened concentration let him hear all of that clearly.

*Crunch!*

Among the cacophony, the sound of something large stepping on fallen leaves seemed incredibly loud. The King of the Mountain, however, didn't immediately attack YuSung, it was as if it knew something was odd.

*Step. Step.*

Instead, it circled the boy, trying to find a weak point in his defenses. And just when it thought it had found it, it lunged.

*Leap!*

“Grrr!”

Behind YuSung's back, his blind spot.

An unseeable attack from YuSung's opponent.

But he could sense everything. Just by the wind pressure, his keen senses could deduce what size his opponent was and how close its claws were to hitting him.

His senses were in the realm of being superhuman.

*Wsh!*

YuSung turned his head. With precise movements, he stretched out his hand.

### **Battle God Style Third Form - Heaven Shattering Fist Strike**

His punch struck what seemed like air. Not long after, though, it was stopped by something, and an explosion rang out as the mana hit its mark.

*Boom!! Plop plop plop!*

The immense force tore apart and threw the beast's remains every which way—YuSung had defeated the boss monster with nothing but his concentration and his hearing.

**[You have earned a token for defeating Mount Sarnia's rank 4 boss monster. You will go ahead into the finals.]**

*Shake shake.*

YuSung shook off the blood from the King of the Mountain from his hands as if it was nothing.

**[Amy♥: no way... you took out a boss monster you couldn't even see in one shot...]**

It was a scene that one would find hard to believe, even after watching it with their own two eyes.

It was impossible to comprehend the things YuSung had done with ordinary logic.

**[Amy♥: i can't believe... you're a human like the rest of us, party leader...]**

Which was why Amy's reaction was rather understandable.

# Chapter 67

The event organizer split the screen of the broadcast in half.

—YuSung, who fought the King of the Mountain.

—Adela, who fought the Fire Ghost.

The two defeated their respective targets in sync. As they did so, both the screen and all of the lights in the stadium turned off at once.

A moment of silence.

*Flash! Flash! Flash!*

Suddenly, the lights turned back on, illuminating the stage. The MC, Yu HanNah, walked to the center. Following her, two faces appeared on the screen.

**[1 – Shin YuSung]**

**[2 – Adela Ortensia]**

Yu HanNah grinned as she gave her greetings.

“Thanks for your patience, everyone! We now have two candidates! Between them, we will be able to choose who can represent Korea!”

Even in the East Asia region, where there were plenty of nations with strong hunters, the Selections event stood out among the rest. In that situation, Korea truly did have a chance to become the winner of the International Competition.

The crowds’ anticipation turned into cheers as they rang throughout the stadium.



– Whoaaa!!

“Before we show you the map where the match will take place, we’ll be going over the rules of the Selection!”

The voting turnout was displayed on the screen after she said so.

**[1 – Shin YuSung 0%]**

**[2 – Adela Ortensia 0%]**

“You can’t vote until the match is over. However, the votes from those watching will be converted to points and will have a great effect on the overall grading for each candidate! And...!”

Yu HanNah paused to give herself a chance to breathe, then signed both of her hands towards the VIP seats. The lights then shined over that area.

—Fist King, Yu WonHak.

—Silver Wind, Arden.

—Association President, Kang YuChan.

—Mind’s Eye, Shoichi.

TL/N: There’s a character who shows up in Chapter 42 with the same title named Yu HyungJin. Any connection is still unknown.

—Committee member Ju HimChan.

And other well-known hunters were sitting in the VIP seats.

“The secondary method of grading is the ratings from the judges! Of course, Korea invited famous hunters from all around the world for this event!”

*Flash!*

The screen changed what was displayed once again.

Viewers could see Adela and YuSung in the waiting room map, waiting for the program to proceed.

“The final method is combat! The goings-on and the results of the match will have a huge impact on their overall scores!”

To summarize what Yu HanNah was saying, there were three criteria in which the contestants were graded in:

Citizens’ vote...

Ratings from the judges...

And the match itself.

Mei Lin’s turn as the commentator had come. She gripped the mic and spoke.

“Currently, South Korea is the third nation in East Asia to perform its Representative Selections.”

Her statement was correct.

In China, the representative was Liú Jùn.

In Japan, the representative was Seiji.

The results of the Selection had already been determined for those two countries.

“The Selections are where a representative is selected in order to bolster their nation’s standing. I ask the participants for an honorable fight and those judging them to do so fairly.”

The people in the crowd once again went wild as she finished. The fervor in the stadium was at its peak.

Yu WonHak began speaking to Arden with a content look on his face.

“Watching this whole event makes me remember the day we first fought each other.”

“Haha. You won that time, but I’m sure the results will be different today—Adela isn’t me, and that boy isn’t you, either.”

Yu WonHak nodded at his words as if agreeing with them.

“True, YuSung isn’t me.”

One of Fist King’s titles was ‘The Strongest of the Previous World’, which is why Arden spoke so confidently.

But Yu WonHak smiled and continued.

“Because that boy... will become stronger than me.”

Arden’s eyes narrowed at the declaration. Yu WonHak had always boasted about being the strongest. That was the first time the other man had ever considered someone’s potential above his own.

‘Is the boy really that strong?’

The skills YuSung had displayed so far were incredible, to be sure, but Arden couldn’t feel the sort of gap in power that he had felt from the Fist King quite yet.

‘If what he’s saying is true... ’

Around the time that Yu WonHak was YuSung’s age, he had built the foundations for what would become the third form of the Battle God Style, but the man had said that YuSung had surpassed him—meaning... the boy was beginning to master the fourth form.

Arden collected his thoughts before replying.

“This will be an entertaining match, won’t it?”

A short sentence that showed his anticipation.

Yu WonHak nodded, arms folded across his chest.

“Mhm... I’ve seen countless hunters with outstanding Traits, but none with as much talent as your granddaughter. This will be quite the fun one.”

YuSung’s Trait was F-rank. If he managed to beat Adela, it was sure to bring great havoc.

*Flash! Drrrrr!*

As the lights aimed themselves at the stage once again, the screen displayed a slot machine that began to spin rapidly.

“Now, then!” yelled Yu HanNah. “The pride and joy of the Representative Selections! We’ll now be revealing the map that the finals will take place on!”

Drrrr! Rrr...

### **[Airborne Dojo]**

The slot machine finally stopped, selecting the map. A flat arena was displayed on the screen, situated among the clouds in the sky.

The Airborne Dojo’s terrain wasn’t particularly distinctive in any way. It was perfect for testing one’s abilities against another.

All the preparations for the match were complete.

Yu HanNah gripped the mic and yelled.

“The fight will now begin!”

\* \* \*

A far-off blue sky, where clouds resided.

The arena created an endless expanse above the heavens.

Adela stared YuSung down with a blank look in her eyes.

“This is the first time we’re fighting each other.”

Adela had been waiting for that moment to arrive ever since the day she had heard that YuSung was the disciple of the Fist King.

Even in Korea, which was called the place where hunters originated, Adela’s talent was unmatched. But if her opponent was the disciple of that ‘Fist King’, whose name her grandfather had repeated until it had worn her ears out, wouldn’t they be someone who could finally match her skills?

That was how much she was looking forward to the fight.

Of course, every fight Adela had participated in up to that point had been a disappointment, one after another. She had fought countless opponents, but at the end of each match, the expressions they all wore were the same:

—Awe.

—Terror.

—Despair.

Adela felt immeasurable disappointment every time she met face-to-face with the sense of defeat the loser experienced as they felt the overwhelming gap in power between them and her.

That meant that she could never get heated up in excitement, no matter who her opponent was.

She couldn’t give the fight her all.

She wanted to know her limits; to display every bit of her skill.

But she could not find an opponent to do so against. Her perfect win record left her incredibly bored.

“It’s an honor.”

YuSung respectfully addressed the strongest student in Korea with his distinctive smile.

*Flash!*

Blue pixels swathed YuSung’s body and clothed it in the Black Dragon’s Hide. It was proof that he was planning on giving the fight his all from the very beginning of the match.

*Zzzt!*

Adela felt the presence of YuSung’s polished mana through the air. Subconsciously, she began to get excited.

“...Amazing. To think that you can handle such fierce mana in this precise a manner.”

Her anticipation was slowly rising.

Adela was looking forward to the start of the match more than she ever had before. She wanted to confirm her opponent’s skills for herself.

**[Three seconds until start of match]**

YuSung got into position.

Adela aimed one of her palms towards him.

**[Two seconds]**

YuSung’s explosive energy suddenly disappeared, and it began running as calmly and quietly as a stream.

‘A sneak attack? In this wide-open area?’

A battle of mind games began during the scant few seconds before the beginning of the fight. Simulations of events that Adela hadn’t experienced before swam through her head at dizzying speeds.

**[One second]**

A tension that encompassed their bodies.

Adela and YuSung stared at each other.

**[Start!]**

Adela expelled her mana in time with the sound of the whistle that rang throughout the arena.

*Whoosh!*

**[Absolute Zero Area]**

Adela’s eyes glowed even redder as the spot where YuSung used to be in was frozen over from the frigid chill.

It was a fatal Skill that could immediately end a fight so long as it even grazed the opponent.

*Tup!*

Right before the boy was about to freeze over, he disappeared—quickly enough that her eyes couldn’t follow his movements.

YuSung appeared right behind Adela.

*Whoosh!*

‘Behind me.’

A thin sheet of ice blocked YuSung's punch before it could hit her.

*Crack!*

Ice shards flew everywhere as the sheet crumbled under his fist. Adela turned her head towards the boy and gripped the air with her hand.

*Shnk!*

Countless spears of ice dotted the air. Hunters usually had trouble trying to calculate each and every single area where their Trait would affect, but Adela know how to do so instinctively.

*Peltpeltpelt!*

The ice spears began falling towards YuSung in a great wave. In response, the boy stayed in place and spun in a half-circle.

### **[Heavenly Rotation of the Black Dragon]**

Black mana spewed out from the Hide and encircled YuSung, creating a barrier shaped like a half-circle that protected him from the onslaught. The black aura absorbed Adela's spears, dissipating them.

"My turn."

YuSung's face had lost all traces of his smile. He was serious.

The boy stretched out his palm towards Adela, despite the distance that had been created between them.

*Zzzt! Boom!*

### **[Black Dragon's Ripple]**

YuSung's mana and Adela's mana that the Heavenly Rotation had absorbed were released all at once. The attack even managed to take the form of a long-range wave.



*Kghhhh!*

It was too late to dodge the attack. Adela stared at the inky wave heading towards her and smiled.

‘That was dangerous.’

It felt like all of the hairs on her body were standing up on their ends.

To think he would aim an attack like that at her during the split second when she was vulnerable. That was the first time Adela had felt nervousness during a fight, even though it was a rather common emotion for people to feel in similar circumstances.

*Krrrrrk!*

A wall of ice shot up from the ground and blocked the Black Dragon’s Ripple.

It was Adela’s turn to attack. She raised her left hand and drew a diagonal line in the air.

**[Winter Terrain]**

*Bam!*

Mana radiated from Adela’s hand and spread along the arena, freezing the ground it touched—it was a terrifying Skill that would freeze any feet touching the floor in place.

YuSung kicked off the ground and jumped.

*Tap!*

It was common knowledge among hunters that one couldn’t dodge attacks when they were in midair. Adela formed her hand into the shape of a gun and mimed shooting him with it.

*Bang!*

A bullet made of ice formed at her fingertips and shot itself towards YuSung. Right before it could hit him, though, he created a mana barrier behind his back.

‘A mana barrier?’

Adela’s eyes narrowed.

It was impossible for a simple mana barrier to block her attack, especially considering that it wasn’t even his Trait. On top of that, the location where the barrier was created was behind him. Something was up.

But YuSung wasn’t trying to block the attack at all. He kicked the barrier in mid-air, using it to change his trajectory.

*Bam!*

He flew in the air like a streak of light.

The bullet Adela shot just barely grazed by him. But at that point, YuSung’s palm was already right in front of her face.

### **Battle God Style - Savage Dragon's Boulder Crushing Palm**

Adela could feel the mana storm whipping up, intending to shred her. The crude movements the mana made in the air looked like the blades of a blender making their way towards her.

‘I can’t dodge this.’

### **[Frost Dragon’s Egg]**

Adela, who had always acted effortlessly up to then, crossed both of her arms together for the first time.

*Crack!*

Adela surrounded herself with a blue sphere. The Crushing Palm had

made a crack in it, but the overall shape of the technique was maintained.

That Skill was Adela's ace in the hole, one that she could only use once per day. That was the first time she had ever gotten to use it in a real fight.

*Krrrack! Wshh—*

The sphere opened up, releasing a white-tinged chill into the air. YuSung quickly backed up.

*Step step.*

Adela leisurely stepped out of it.

Seeing her emerge, the boy got back into position.

“This is the first time I’ve seen you smile.”

Adela looked at her reflection in the sphere after hearing his remark. Like he had said, a corner of her lips had jutted up.

Her heart was pulsating in quick beats.

Her blood was growing hotter and hotter from the tension.

She had experienced battle techniques that had never even occurred to her before.

‘This is fun.’

Adela was immensely enjoying her fight with YuSung. The emotions she was feeling for the first time in her life were enough to make her want to laugh.

“You’re strong.”

If her opponent was that skilled, Adela had no choice but to use all of

her strength. It was the moment she had always been waiting for.

**“Overtura (Overture).”**

Holding her grin back, Adela whispered this in a cold voice and closed her eyes.

*Wshhhh–*

As she did so, the arena began to transform. Only when the environment turned into a snowy, white wonderland did Adela reopen her eyes.

“This is the first time...”

Her silver locks fluttered elegantly as the frigid wind blew past. Her crimson eyes stared straight into YuSung’s own.

“I’ve used this technique on someone.”

The Queen of Winter began her concert.



# Chapter 68

Metro City's Stadium...

–This is the first time...

–I've used this technique on someone.

Adela's words rang throughout the arena, showing her resolve to go all out. Arden was genuinely impressed by YuSung's skill.

“To think... Adela would struggle this much. As I thought... Yu WonHak, he really is your disciple. What an incredible young lad.”

“It's too early for you to be surprised by him,” he replied confidently, crossing his arms. “I told you, right? That YuSung is going to become stronger than I am?”

Arden stared at Adela and became lost in thought.

‘...Adela. You look like you're having fun.’

The disaster of the Winter Witch, Luisa—a rank 7 boss.

He had wondered if Adela had lost her heart and her emotions to the frigid temperatures she had to endure during the event. A bitter taste appeared in his mouth at the thought.

But the sight of his granddaughter genuinely enjoying the match gave him a sense of relief.

‘...I know I said all that, but... ’

Yu WonHak aimed a sincere gaze towards YuSung amidst the heartwarming atmosphere that had been created.

‘You would’ve needed to grow as well in order to overcome this opponent.’

YuSung had left the Martial Spirits’ Mountain and Yu WonHak’s care. The last he had seen him, the boy had been on the third form.

If his growth had halted there, Adela would be too strong of an opponent to face.

However, he believed that his disciple would be able to move onto the next form.

‘Show it to me!’

\* \* \*

*Whoosh!*

A violently churning blizzard.

Adela stared at YuSung, standing perfectly fine even in the middle of the severe cold.

“It seems like the reason why I came to Korea was to meet you,” she spoke, words coming out slow.

The chill was slowly encircling YuSung. He, however, did nothing but wait, mana encircling his body as he took his stance.

‘By the time I see what shape the technique takes the form of, it’ll be too late.’

It was a high-level fight where one mistake could lead to one’s loss. YuSung poured his concentration into the mana in the air.

“Then, I’ll make the first move.”

Adela emotionlessly swiped at the air with her hand in a horizontal motion. The mana in the air began to glow with a blue light as she did

so. YuSung took that chance to quickly lunge himself towards his opponent.

*Bambambam!!*

Ice appeared right over the location his body used to be and exploded with the force of a bomb. The leftover ice shards scattered into the shape of flowers, creating a beautiful display.

*Whoosh!*

YuSung, who had been attacking Adela head-on, stretched out his fist. Right at that moment, however, he felt mana gather at his feet.

‘...Multi-Skill?’

Using more than one skill at the same time.

He had no choice but to back off as a giant spike of ice shot up in front of his opponent.

‘It’ll be hard trying to blindly close the gap.’

YuSung distanced himself even farther from Adela in order to get another chance at an attack.

While the distance technically gave him less chances to do so, it also made the opponent’s Skillcasting slower—another piece of knowledge that all hunters knew.

‘She already used a barrier Skill. Taking into account the amount of mana she’s consumed, the longer this match continues, the better of a position I’ll be in.’

YuSung’s thoughts were even more calculating than ever in the face of a tough opponent.

Adela suddenly began talking to him while he was in that state with a blank look on her face.



“Are you... sensing... the mana in the atmosphere?”

‘But how?’ was the question she clearly had. YuSung had not reacted to the attack as a result of seeing it with his eyes. An opponent who did would not be able to dodge the attack hidden behind the feint that she had just done.

‘But... ’

From what she had seen, YuSung had already been in position to perfectly dodge the attack right before the Skill had even been cast.

This was a feat that was absolutely impossible for a regular hunter to perform. But YuSung’s Trait, Heightened Focus, was enabling him to do the impossible.

”A little,” was his rather casual response. Adela’s heart began to beat even faster at it.

“How amusing.”

Using her Overture meant that she had to finish YuSung off before her concert ended. Adela had given herself a time limit for the fight.

‘If I don’t beat him... ’

The thought itself was enough to make her excited. She could finally understand what emotions her opponents had felt while battling against her up to that point.

‘It’s my loss... ’

Their fight wasn’t even the least bit boring, even when they were standing still and sizing each other up. Adela spent every single moment focusing on YuSung’s movements, straining her mind in an effort to find a gap in his defenses.

‘I can’t find any.’

But she couldn't see anything of the sort, nor could she think of any sort of plan.

He had dealt with her ice trap earlier. Considering that, it was meaningless to force even more short-range fights using high-speed Skills.

What Adela had to rely on was her greatest talent—the overwhelming scale of her Trait and her exceptional control over it.

“Intermezzo (Interlude).”

At her crooning, ice in the shapes of weapons began to form in the air. Not a drop of mana was wasted in order to create the greatest curtain call she could muster.

*Wave!*

Adela moved her arm in a grandiose motion, the tip of her finger pointing towards YuSung. And as promised, the ice weapons began to fly towards him.

*Wshhhhh!!*

Deadly ice began raining down on him.

YuSung used his mana to bring out the full extent of his Trait.

*Blink!!*

He looked up at the sky, eyes wide open. His perception of time became slower and slower until it stopped altogether, while his head began to process things faster and faster.

“Three steps to the left in order to dodge the nearest ice weapon.”

*Taptaptap!*

The deadly projectile hit the ground right next to him as soon as he

made his move.

‘Left!’

His heart began to pound as the speed of his thoughts accelerated.

YuSung pulled his foot back.

*Stab!*

A spear of ice hit the ground.

‘Back.’

He spun his body around in a half-circle motion.

*Crrrrrack!*

More ice fell right next to him in an avalanche.

While he had dodged any mortal wounds, scratches were left behind on his flesh every time sharp ice nicked it.

‘Next, a large step back.’

YuSung took a short breath after dodging as many of the attacks he could. Even after using up an incredible amount of concentration, his eyes maintained a sharp glare at Adela.

‘Not yet.’

He was waiting for something. That was what his battle instincts, honed and sharpened up to that point, were telling him.

Adela and YuSung stared at each other.

“Aria (Aria).”

The swept-up winds settled at her crooning.

A moment of silence and calm.

Then, a single stream of furious storm aimed itself right towards YuSung. It was the queen's aria, the highlight of the [Snow Opera].

A translucent, blue-tinged barrier also went up.

'I... can't dodge this.'

YuSung knew this, as he could sense mana. The scale of the Skill that had been activated was much too big.

Adela's expression was calm.

'You can't do anything so long as you're trapped in that barrier.'

YuSung's Trait and Adela's Trait were on completely different levels.

That was not an evaluation made with the fact that the former was F-rank, and the latter S-rank, in consideration. Even if everyone in S Class attacked Adela, victory was not guaranteed; that was just how oppressively powerful her Trait was.

And the [Snow Opera] Adela was using was her ultimate attack. She was fully confident in her win.

*Sss!*

The barrier continued to close in to finish off her opponent. It was time to close the curtains on this concert that had risen to a fervor. Adela slowly lowered her arms, which had been crossed, in front of her.

"Finale (Finale)."

The end of the concert.

Inside the barrier YuSung was trapped in, a fierce storm was hitting him on all sides. The ice shards were flung violently by the winds, tearing him to shreds like the blades in a blender—that was the final song to be performed in Adela's [Snow Opera].

‘...Is this the end?’

Her face was awash in disappointment as she stared at the barrier.

Adela's fight against YuSung felt like a piece of candy she had eaten during the disaster. A short, but delightful amount of time that was so very sweet on the tongue. Precious enough to her that she wanted to savor it and let the candy melt slowly melt in her mouth.

‘But... that happiness has to end now.’

Adela closed her eyes, a complicated expression on her face.

\* \* \*

The winds were growing stronger.

Shards of ice were flying everywhere.

Even in the middle of this hell, YuSung's body was fine.

*Tink! Tap!*

The ice shards were repelled away from his body thanks to the mana barrier around him.

But that would only be true for a moment. If the winds grew faster, he wouldn't be able to hold out, no matter how much mana he had.

‘I only have one chance.’

However, Adela herself was using an enormous amount of mana for her [Snow Opera]. His current moment of crisis was also his chance.

YuSung brought all of the senses in his body up into greater focus. It was a process he had endlessly repeated during his constant training.

With the least amount of concentration...

The most amount of mana...

‘Spread it evenly.’

He poured all of his concentration into using the skill. As he did so, his mana barrier began to gradually weaken.

*Shnk! Drip.*

Blood began to flow from the wound in his arm but froze immediately. The pain was quite severe, but YuSung’s focus didn’t falter.

A wound of that caliber was no longer a problem to him; YuSung had become impervious to physical pain.

The day he had been cast aside from the Shin-oh family...

He had learned sadness.

The day his master had chosen him...

He had learned happiness.

Similarly, the pain he had experienced had dulled over the course of time, as well as his memories. Of course, there were still remnants of it.

As YuSung opened up the senses in his body and remembered his training, those remnants of his memory began to pass through his head.

[Because Shin YuSung-ssi taught all of us that.]

Among those were the words from the first comrade who had opened up to him—

[Tch, not a single cute bone in your body. Yeah. What I want to say is... you need to loosen up your shoulders every once in a while.]

—as well as a kind master who tried to teach his disciple the concept of taking a break—

[I wish... that my talent had gone to my brother instead...]

—and a comrade who shared her deepest, most hidden insecurities with him.

The experiences he had with those people happened because he had strived to reach his goal. To YuSung, that was why there was no chance of some sort of problem occurring to him that would make him give up on his goal. Everything in his way was nothing but a wall to smash through or stairs to climb.

The mana in his body began to spread evenly throughout it alongside the fragments of his memories.

It was time to perform the last step.

“Pull it out!” shouted YuSung, his forehead creasing.

As he did so, blue light began to emanate from his body.

But that wasn’t the end. As long as he had a goal in mind, he didn’t stop putting in the effort. YuSung became even stronger as a result.

*Ssst!!*

The blue light shone even brighter, repelling the ice shards with its force. Gradually, the color of the light began to darken to black.

**Battle God Style Fourth Form - Black Dragon's Body Armor**

An incredible show of mana.

The ebony-dyed energy formed into the shape of a dragon and shot up to the heavens in an effort to destroy the barrier.

*Crack! Snaaap!!*

The one who pulled the curtains closed on the [Snow Opera] was not Adela.

\* \* \*

*Crack! Craaaaack!*

Black energy blasted out of the cracks forming on the blue barrier.

“That’s...”

Adela’s heart beat even faster at the sight.

The girl had never used the Skill [Snow Opera] before. She had no need for an extravagant, ultimate Skill like that.

Until that day...

[Snow Opera] was crumbling before her very eyes.

*Boom!!*

The barrier shattered, and mana shaped like a black dragon burst forth from it like it was hatching out of its egg, soaring towards the heavens. Adela watched it happen, forming an unconscious smile on her lips.

“Shin YuSung...”





It felt like her cold, frozen heart was beating hot and fast in her chest.

The dragon-shaped energy plummeted back down to the ground and hit YuSung, infusing him with its energy.

*Zzzzt!!*

After performing the fourth form, a black aura crudely radiated from YuSung's body.

Adela had drawn her mana out, forming an aura of sub-zero chill around her.

A fight to the bitter end with the title of the representative of Korea on the line.

The two participants looked at each other. There was no need for words. Both were already set alight by their instinctive need to win, to crush their opponent.

All that was left was to check the results.

YuSung and Adela grinned in sync.

# Chapter 69

Five years old.

Nothing but winter could be seen outside her window.

The mountains were covered in white snow, and the city was plunged into silence.

It was impossible for a safe haven such as this city to become a place where people were stranded, but Luisa, the rank 7 boss, made it possible.

Her existence itself was a calamity.

She had transformed Volterra, a city built on top of a mountain summit, into an icy wasteland. Monsters soon began populating it.

The winter that Luisa had created was violent and persistent. The chill made one's hands and feet freeze over and their breath come out in condensation gas, but none of it was real; it was an illusion.

No one ever got hypothermia or frostbite. All the cold did was make them suffer and rob them of their mana. Every minute, every second in which the survivors were trapped on Volterra was hell.

Luisa used the suffering of humans to grow stronger and stronger.

Unable to stand by and let more casualties pile up, Adela's parents had planned a raid. Their goal was Luisa's castle. Their opponent was a rank 7 boss monster, but they themselves were both rank 6 hunters—the highest in the Association. There was a possibility for their success.

[Adela, we'll be back soon. Alright?]

Adela's father smiled while patting her head.

[You just have to wait by yourself for three days. Three days, okay?]

And her mother tightly embraced her before she left. Her hug was warm enough to make the girl forget the cold.

Adela shook her head.

She didn't like the fact that she had to stay separated from her parents, no matter what the reason was. No, she was scared of it.

[I'm sorry. I'm really, really sorry... but there's nothing we can do.]

However, her mother erected a barrier and left, her father in tow.

All that was left with Adela was the freezing cold and a single teddy bear.



A day passed.

The soup that her mother had made for her was cold but delicious.

Two days passed.

The time she spent alone waiting for her parents was lonely and boring.

Finally, the third day that her parents had promised...

But they did not come back home.

Four days passed.

The canned beans that had been saved as emergency food tasted awful.

A week passed.

The barrier disappeared, and the chill that Luisa had created grew even harsher.

Adela really hated this cold.

At least if she froze over she wouldn't have to feel pain anymore.

But what hurt her, a girl of barely five years of age, more than anything else was the loneliness.

By the time one month had passed, she couldn't even remember the sound of her own voice.

'I want to see them'

Her mother, her father.

No, it could be anyone. A human being.

This is why Adela left the house and began to walk around, no destination in mind.

But the city, struck by disaster, was silent. All of its residents were already at their limit.

An aura of death permeated the roads, the houses, and the buildings. There was no one who could afford to show care or concern for a young child in that calamitous city when they could barely afford to do so for themselves.

So she wandered around the city for some time, then returned back home.

She couldn't leave—Luisa didn't permit her food to escape her grasp.

\* \* \*

More time passed. It had been a month since her parents had left.

Adela had to kill some part of herself in order to survive. No one could endure the loneliness and cold that had struck Volterra without breaking in some way.

\* \* \*

Three months.

She no longer wanted to see her father anymore. She no longer wanted to eat her mother's soup. She no longer felt the cold.

Her birthday had arrived.

Coincidentally, Adela's Trait had also manifested at that time. It was expected, seeing as she was five years old, turning six.

Her Trait was S-rank and of an ice element. It was rather ironic, considering that no one hated the cold as much as she did.

\* \* \*

How much time had passed by that point.

[Mr. Arden! Over here! There's a child!]

[Adela!!]

The scenery outside of her window had returned back to normal. People were picking their lives back up again, rediscovering their place in the world.

Except for Adela. She couldn't.

She had already changed. She had already lost too much.

Her frozen heart had stopped beating.

\* \* \*

But that day was different.

*Badump! Badump!*

Adela's heart was beating out of her chest. She could feel her nervousness, numbing her all the way to the tips of her fingers. She felt energized.

'I want to win.'

More specifically, she wanted to bare everything within her out into the open. She wanted to draw out every bit of emotion she was currently feeling so that she could etch them permanently into her body.

That moment...

That was when Adela finally felt something she had been longing for that entire time: 'the feeling of being alive'.

"Fiori d'inverno (Winter's Blossom)!" she yelled at the top of her voice.



Adela had thought she had lost all of her emotions, but that wasn't the case. True, genuine emotions were stirring up her heart. She was so excited it felt like she was losing her mind.

*Boom!*

She used every last bit of mana she had.

*Craaaaack!!*

Numerous pieces of ice formed around Adela and gathered in front of her.

*Klink klink klink!*

All of the gathered ice merged and reformed into a beautiful flower.

The flurry of mana surrounding Adela was blowing her hair backwards in a frenzy.

"I'm going all out."

The flower in front of her had seven petals and acted as a sort of barrier. Without destroying them all, one could not approach her.

*Wshh!!*

Once the petals finished forming, blue mana began gathering in the center of the flower. If [Snow Opera] was a Skill that dominated the battlefield, [Winter's Blossom] was one that acted as both an attack and defense.

*Vmmm!!*

The mana particles had been gathered to maximum capacity. The petals began to glow.

Even in that dire situation, YuSung calmly regulated the aura in his body.

‘There’s plenty of time.’

He was currently using Black Dragon’s Body Armor. At that point, what he needed wasn’t time but the composure needed to control the technique.

‘Slowly but surely.’

A concentration that opened up his senses.

YuSung moved the aura in his body, bit by bit.

Legs to hips...

Hips to heart...

Heart to arms...

Arms to fist...

YuSung pulled in the freely-flowing energy of the Black Dragon in his body to one, singular point.

‘...Power is like a flame,’ he thought, remembering something his master had told him at some point.

[Kuhaha, it’s a good thing we found some dry firewood! It’s burning well!]

[See this, YuSung? Look at the bonfire! Power is just like this, the flame!]

[What does that mean, you ask? Hmm, well, you’ll learn the meaning naturally as you grow older!]

YuSung finally understood Yu WonHak’s teachings.

Fire was something that simply burned. It was perilous enough that even a small breeze could threaten to extinguish it, but it could also

raze everything in its vicinity without care for what it was.

No matter how great a certain power or technique was, it was meaningless if the person using it couldn't reign it in.

YuSung had managed to display the strong technique known as the Black Dragon's Body Armor. Now, he had to prove himself worthy of it.

*Tup!*

YuSung shot ahead like a comet.

Black-colored aura trailed behind him like a trail.

*Flash!*

He reached speeds he couldn't before.

The energy emanating from the Body Armor was raging within YuSung, trying to escape from him, but he gripped the churning mana as tightly as he could, using the smallest of tension in his control to do so.

It was too early. He couldn't let the power loose yet.

‘Just a little bit... a little bit more!’

The barrier that Adela had erected was right in front of his eyes. Time slowed to a crawl for him, even more than it had previously.

“Fioritura (Blossom)!”

Adela opened her hands. As she did so, the flower began to glow in front of YuSung's eyes.

**[※Danger!]**

**[The portal's mana capacity is reaching 87%!]**

A hologram appeared before both contestants' eyes, but neither of them took notice.

All each one wanted from the other was their full strength.

*Zzzt!!*

Adela gave the order to shoot.

One of the petals on the ice flower disappeared.

“Now!”

YuSung didn't miss the chance. He stretched his hand out towards the dissipating light.

### **Battle God Style - Savage Dragon's Boulder Crushing Palm**

*Boom!!*

In an instant, the black aura was freed from his body and clashed with the blue light. However, the former was slowly eating into the latter.

*Bam!!*

The blue light that Adela had shot dissipated; next in line were the petals of the ice flower.

*Bam! Crack!*

A crack appeared in one of the petals and it too disappeared.

Only five petals were left.

*Ssst!!*

Four petals...

Three...

Two...

One...

Adela squeezed out every last ounce of mana she had left in her body in order to maintain the last petal.

**[System error]**

**[System error]**

**[System error]**

**[The portal's mana capacity has been surpassed!]**

Their Pockets were blasting alarms now as if the holograms weren't enough anymore.

The power of the Black Dragon's Body Armor, threatening to consume Adela...

And the single flower petal made of ice in its way...

*Booom!!*

The two powers collided and created an explosion. The floor of the arena shattered, creating dust in the air. A massive gust of wind swept over the stadium.

**[Simulation Failed]**

**[The portal will be forcibly terminated.]**

Even the hosts of the event, the Hunter Association, had not expected that much power. Adela and YuSung had managed to handily surpass the record and limit set by them. Thanks to that, the fake world inside the portal had crumbled around them.

# Chapter 70

YuSung grimaced.

– Unbelie... ble! The portal was forcibly closed!

The broadcast station's speakers were loud.

Feeling still hadn't come back to his ears.

*Throb!*

A slight headache...

– Whoaaaaa!!!

The voices of the crowd going wild...

‘This is... ’

YuSung slowly opened his eyes.

The lights in the stadium were shining solely on him and Adela.

“To repeat ourselves, this is unprecedented! Just how much mana was released inside the portal? The abilities these two contestants showed in the finals were incredible!”

Mei Lin nodded at the fuss Yu HanNah was making with her commentary.

“We apologize. We failed to properly account for the mana capacity of the two finalists. It's the complete fault of us, the hosts.”

But no one in the audience put Mei Lin or the Association at fault for

the oversight. In fact, the mood in the stadium was much like one at a festival—they had gotten a proper look at Korea’s capabilities.

Shin YuSung, who was a new face that had arrived just that year, was especially the focus of attention.

‘...The feeling in my body is starting to come back.’

After coming back to his senses, YuSung began slowly scanning the stadium. He could clearly hear the shouts and cheers of countless audience members in his ears.

– So cool!

– You’re Korea’s representative!

– I bet you’ll win with these skills!

*Clench!*

YuSung clenched his fist.

Such a large number of people were cheering him on.

‘I...’

He felt strange.

YuSung still couldn’t forget the words his parents had told him back when they had abandoned him.

[You won’t be able to survive in the Shin-oh family with an F-rank Trait, anyways.]

—His father, when he had learned of his Trait, whose eyes were cold as he looked at YuSung, as if he was a stranger.

[Give up on becoming a hunter and live a normal life. That wouldn’t be too bad.]

—His mother, who said those words and then turned around, leaving him.

To YuSung back then, when he was only five years old, he thought that it was his fault that had happened.

Because his Trait was F-rank...

Because he couldn't live up to the expectations of his parents...

—That's why he had been abandoned.

'Not anymore, though.'

YuSung, who had grown properly under the care of Yu WonHak, knew then that he was not the one in the wrong. The ones who were in the wrong were the Shin-oh family and its head, who had judged their children based on their talent and had abandoned them based on what qualities they had.

YuSung had proven his worth to not just them but to the rest of the world.

– Whoaaa!!

The crowd went wild as he smiled and waved his hand.

Adela, the other person on the stage who was the focus, did nothing but look at YuSung.

“...I have something I'm curious about.”

The boy turned his head towards her. Adela's stare was boring a hole through his head.

“Someone like you could have definitely avoided my attack.”

It was plenty possible for his body, imbued with the Black Dragon's Body Armor, to do so.



“But why did you meet my attack head-on?” she asked, voice softer than usual.

YuSung answered her bashfully. “I... just wanted to.”

The fervor he felt during the battle...

His body that had been on the verge of collapse...

His mana that was used to his limits...

When YuSung clashed against Adela, he felt his hunter’s instinct rear its head—the one that made him want to attack someone with everything he had.

Adela wasn’t the only one who was happy to fight an opponent who could match her in strength. That was the first time YuSung had ever fought someone using all of his power since he had left the mountain.

“I see.”

The girl nodded after hearing his answer, then threw another question at him.

“...Are you planning to win in the International Competition?”

“Yes,” he replied, nodding.

The International Competition was where nations put their own strength and fame on the line. It was the best chance he had to fight fellow students who were also powerful.

Adela fell into deep thought.

“I’m looking forward to it,” she finally said, closing her eyes and nodding her head.

“I’ve changed my mind, thanks to you. It seems like... we’ll be seeing each other again.”

And she ended the conversation with those meaningful words.

*Murmur murmur.*

The discussion the judges in the VIP seats were having ended. Mei Lin, Academy City's manager, acted as both commentator and judge during the Selection.

"Now, before the voting begins, I will evaluate both students using my authority as a judge."

The stadium quieted down at her words. The perspective she had on the match as a rank 6 hunter, was different than that of an ordinary citizen's. What she would say was sure to have an effect on the voting.

"The Competition is an event held between nations. Many rounds and tests will take place during it, which is why I place great importance on balance and endurance."

Mei Lin glanced towards Adela with the impartial eyes of an evaluator.

"Student Adela's Trait and Skills are both quite adept at creating many variables. It's also useful in challenging large numbers of opponents, and her outstanding potential is a given."

The girl had too many strengths to her to count. Her position as the strongest among the first years in her school was not for show.

But of course, she had her faults.

"But her combat ability relies entirely on her Trait. Due to this, she doesn't have much endurance. After all, the more destructive the Skill, the more extreme its mana usage."

Yu HanNah, who had been listening in with rapt attention, threw in a question. "Then, how about balance..."

Mei Lin shook her head. "She'll be in a pinch if her Trait is incapacitated in some way or if she fights someone who's a bad

match-up against her. Of course, that doesn't mean her strength doesn't dominate over her fellow students."

The criticisms Mei Lin had given were actually rather tacked on. They weren't critical ones by any measure.

Her mana consumption was large...

She relied heavily on her Trait...

If it was incapacitated, she would be in danger...

Those were not weaknesses exclusive to Adela, but to hunters with strong Traits in general.

The problem was YuSung's existence.

"On the other hand, Student Shin YuSung's exceptional physical abilities means that he won out in perseverance during the fight. In the case of a match where he and his opponent have equal combat ability, his reliance on his Trait is low, so there's no danger of him being incapacitated through it."

\* \* \*

Mei Lin ended her evaluation there. Next was Shoichi, another member of the VIP wearing a black eyepatch. Called the Mind's Eye, he was a rank 6 hunter whose expertise had already been well proven.

"I think differently. There's plenty of time until the International Competition, and if you take into account the constant growth potential of an S-rank Trait..."

Shoichi threw a glance at Yu WonHak before declaring his belief out loud.

"...I think Adela is the correct choice."

Next was Ju Him Chan.

“Greetings! I am Ju HimChan! I won’t be able to give any commentary based on logic like the ones who spoke before me, but...”

Next was Kang YuChan.

“Haha! To everyone, as the Association president, my assessment is...”

The twenty judges finished their evaluations with the result being 10 versus 10. It seemed like they had already discussed between each other to leave the decision up to the voters.

“Amazing! The judges are evenly split! It must be from the incredible showing both students made during the match, no? But no problem!”

Yu HanNah wagged her finger. As she did so, the screen lit up with the voting percentages again.

**[1 – Shin YuSung 0%]**

**[2 – Adela Ortensia 0%]**

“The votes are tallied! And now...! We will display...! The results!”

*Drrrrr!!*

The numbers on the screen began rising up at incredible speeds in time with a cutesy sound effect.

YuSung and Adela’s vote percentages broke through 10%.

20%.

30%.

40%.

Finally, unbelievably, they both reached 50.

**[1 – Shin YuSung 50%]**

**[2 – Adela Ortensia 50%]**

Both participants had an equal number of votes.

“Th-the results of the vote is a 50-50 tie... a-a tie!”

Even Yu HanNah, a pro, tripped over her words in shock at the results.

Right then, Adela slowly raised her hand.

All eyes in the nation focused solely on her as she did so, but she had to speak. She couldn't just let the results go.

‘...If the portal hadn't forcibly shut down, it would have been my loss.’

Only Adela, who had faced YuSung's Savage Dragon's Boulder Crushing Fist head-on, knew this.

In fact, she already knew who would win and who would lose after using most of her mana in her [Snow Opera] skill but still failing to seize victory through it.

The reason why Adela participated in the Selection was not to become the representative for Korea. Nor was it for fame or wealth.

All she wanted was a strong opponent to fight against, and YuSung had more than satisfied her thirst to do so.

Of course, she still had some regrets. Adela wanted to fight against YuSung once again. To do so, it was especially important that she didn't become Korea's representative.

‘Since I don't have the right to.’

Adela began whispering into the nervous energy that hung in the air.

“I forfeit.”

Her words were carried by the speakers and rang throughout the stadium.

All that was left was a brief, calm silence.

*Gulp.*

Yu HanNah gripped her microphone.

“F-forfeit! Student Adela has forfeited!! Does she think that Student Shin YuSung is more fit to be the winner?”

Mei Lin let out a sigh of relief. As the results of the vote ended up with both getting 50% of the votes, the Association was put into a position where they had to re-check the count—down to the very last vote if needed.

“The winner is decided! The one who will represent Korea, and the one who won the Selection...! Is...! Shin YuSung!”

Yu HanNah herself was simply happy about the results.

*Bam! Bambam!*

The ceiling opened as a flurry of fanciful cannons shot into the sky. The entire stadium was covered in the raucous sounds of the cannons and applause.

Adela didn't pay her surroundings any mind and instead slowly approached YuSung.

“The next time we meet... I'll win.”

That wasn't a bluff. Her entire life, Adela had never had to do anything on her own. Her talent had been overwhelming and oppressive ever since she had been born.

But that day, she had met YuSung and had lost against him. For the first time ever, she had a goal to chase.

That was possibly the reason as to why she seemed to look happy even when she had lost.

—People changed people.

Whether that was a person's intention or not, the experiences and relationships one made with others were bound to have an influence over them, and YuSung had certainly influenced Adela with that match.

She stared at the other boy.

Her silver locks swayed beautifully in the air. She grinned.

“Arrivederci (Until we meet again).”

A smile that no one had ever seen before was on her face.





# Chapter 71

Adela's forfeit...

"Did that... really..."

Arden was muttering to himself with a dazed expression on his face at the completely unexpected result.

His granddaughter had lost.

On top of that, YuSung had used the Black Dragon's Body Armor, which was the fourth form of the Battle God Style. As Yu WonHak's old friend, he knew just how strong of a technique it was.

"Kuhaha! How was that? My YuSung's technique, that is!"

"...Incredible. A first-year in high school and he's already mastered the fourth form. So you weren't bluffing back when you said that... he has greater potential than you."

"Of course. Now that the match is over, why don't we go and have another round of drinks?"

"Haha! Sure!"

The two men still had plenty to talk about with each other, especially on Arden's end.

"Now that I think about it, YuSung probably considers you as his father."

"Well... I guess you could say that." Yu WonHak's forehead creased horrifically. "Why are you bringing up an embarrassing topic like that."

Arden's expression was serious. "...What do you think of my Adela?"

"...Nothing much?" Yu WonHak picked his ear.

Arden grimaced. "Then start thinking!"

"Your habit of putting your own interests above others is incorrigible. Tut tut!"

The two kept bickering on as they headed towards the bar they had reserved, but they looked like they were enjoying doing so.

\* \* \*

The Sevens dorms...

"Waah, Y-YuSung-ssi! YuSung-ssi... actually won!"

Sumire, who had been watching Amy's broadcast, had tears of admiration pouring down her face.

YuSung winning in the Selections more or less meant that he was the strongest in South Korea among the first years. A historic moment for those with F-rank Traits.

*Whoaaaaa!!*

Soon after, cheers could be heard from the direction of the first-year classrooms. Sumire stared at YuSung being displayed on the screen with a wide smile.

'He's different from me... '

He was the person she idolized.

Back when the 'berserk incident' had happened in Japan, Sumire had run away from the country in order to escape it.

Her classmates and friends, hurt by her own hands... Her teacher,

suspended... Most importantly, the hatred she felt towards herself... Sumire couldn't endure it any longer.

She hated the fact that she ruined everything she tried to do. It frustrated her that she kept hiding away whenever the thought of wanting to change herself emerged in her head.

If it weren't for YuSung's help, she would still be stuck in the same place she had been before. Of that, she was certain.

YuSung was special to Sumire.

She thought of him as someone who lit up his surroundings, unlike her who was pitch-black.

It was the reason why she especially wanted to be by his side. She wanted to be his party member and to be of help to him.

Her heart wondered: if she helps someone who shines, won't she begin to shine herself?

To the current Sumire, though, just being with him was enough.

‘Even this much is too generous... ’

Sumire chuckled, a complicated expression on her face. Part of it looked like relief, but also bitterness. Now that she thought about it, it wasn't like every choice Sumire made had ended up as a mistake.

‘Since leaving Japan... ’

Even if running away felt like a mistake, the place that she had arrived in was her haven.

‘Let me meet Shin YuSung-ssi.’

And Sumire was satisfied with that.

The Shinsung group's mansion...

EunAh, sitting on the sofa, rapidly blinked her eyes.

“Whoa, she really... lost? That Adela?! Really?”

She knew YuSung was strong, but Adela was one of the students considered to be the strongest in the nation among the first-years. Even in Gaon, her skills were out of the question.

“Just how powerful is this guy?”

SuHyun lifted the chopsticks full of noodles to her mouth. “Agh! Hot! Puff... puff! Slurp! He's pweddy ‘mazinm...”

“Argh! Come on! Don't talk while you're eating!” yelled EunAh. “And where did you get those cup noodles from, anyways?!”

“Hm? Oh, Miya brought this over from Japan. You have to eat some carbs every once in a while if you don't want to get stressed out. And you told me that snacks are fine, no?”

SuHyun narrowed her eyes at the other girl as she took a sip of the soup.

EunAh rubbed her forehead. “How does an entire cup noodle count as a snack?”

Even as she was complaining, it was obvious that they had already become a bit too close to each other. SuHyun easily dismissed EunAh's words.

“...It really waz imcredibul. Slurp! That wasm't a fight om a sdudent level, y'know? Ramk 5, eazy.”

Her face was serious, even as she drank the rest of the soup in her cup.

EunAh, arms crossed, nodded in agreement. “Both Adela and YuSung are really strong... And they're my rivals, after all.”

She insisted that they were her rivals without missing a beat. SuHyun found her insistence adorable and forced herself to not smile at it.

“Is that so?”

“I’m still a little behind them both, but it’s only a matter of time. I also ate an artifact recently. I can feel it strengthening my abilities every day.”

Quick bursts of static rose up from EunAh’s body as she said so.

“Well~ I guess it worked out. It’d feel bad if YuSung lost here since I wouldn’t be able to pay back my debt to him.”

She said that statement in a nonchalant manner, but it seemed like she was hiding how pleased she was on the inside. SuHyun, seeing a chance, used the opportunity to ask her something she had been curious about.

“Speaking of, Young Miss. Are you really going to leave his party after the International Competition?”

“Uhh... me?”

EunAh began pondering.

That would eventually be what happened if she followed her original promise. But the longer she stayed in the party, the more EunAh was opening her heart towards to its members. And oddly enough, a corner of her heart got heavier the more she got friendlier with them.

“I’m—”

She began to reply in a quiet voice. Right then, SuHyun’s Pocket began to vibrate.

*Vmmm!*

“Yes, this is Lee SuHyun, Head Secretary of the Shinsun group. What

is the matter?”

SuHyun placed an earphone in one of her ears so that EunAh wouldn't be distracted by the call. The girl in question was staring at her with a pout on her face, dissatisfied by the fact that she had been cut off.

But SuHyun's reaction stayed serious.

“Is-is this true?”

EunAh's eyes narrowed at the other woman's grave tone of voice.

“What's going on? Tell me, I wanna know.”

SuHyun thought about what to say. Eventually, she made her decision and opened her mouth.

“That is... Young Master Kim JunHyuk has woken up.”

“M-my brother... is awake?”

EunAh seemed to be reacting shockingly calmly about the news on the surface, but her body was giving her true feelings away. Her hands, pale, were trembling.

“You aren't lying... right?” asked EunAh, her voice dry.

SuHyun nodded in response, face more sober than it had ever been before.

“...Young Miss, I'll take you to Metro Hospital posthaste.”

\* \* \*

A booth prepared by the Hunter's Association...

Amy turned off her broadcast and sunk into her chair, looking much like ice cream melting in the sun.

“...62 million won in donations in one day? 70,000 live viewers? I... can now die in peace.”

TL/N: Almost \$48,000 USD by current conversion rates.

Just how many records had she broken?

First off, her subscriber count had increased by 20 thousand in just a few hours. Second off, she had gotten the most donations that time around... And the highest amount of live viewers, as well.

“Hu-huhu... huhehe...”

An incredible amount of money, even after paying the streaming platform her commission fee and giving YuSung half for his share. And that wasn't even considering the amount of prominence she had gotten. Moments like those were what made Amy love her job.

“I... I love this... fufufu, Team Leader-nim's star quality is off the chain, as I thought it would be!”

And she, once again, swore her allegiance to him.

\* \* \*

Shin HaYoon basked in the lingering emotions that remained after the end of the match.

The fight between the strongest among the first years—YuSung and Adela—was incredibly entertaining. Even she, the student council president, couldn't help but turn her attention to their skills.

Even deep in thought, she managed to evoke an aura that left others in awe.

But only for a moment.

“Ku, kuku... Kukuku!”

Left to her lonesome, HaYoon began giggling in a deranged manner. It lasted for some time until she finally wiped her tears from her eyes with a stray finger.

“What’s that about F-rank? What’s that about having no talent? They swore he would never become a hunter, and now...”

HaYoon was making fun of her father, the head of the Shin-oh family. Ever since she was little, the girl had grown up in the skill-above-all environment that had been curated by her household.

And the person who enforced that philosophy the most, the one that insisted that the elite ruled over all, was him.

“...A man of your position being this wrong? You’ve practically spit in his face.”

HaYoon’s insults were relentless.

“My mother, too, who agreed with him, and everyone else... Idiots, all of them.”

She opened her eyes and let out one long, drawn-out breath. Her smile reached her eyes.

“As I thought... I’m the only one in this household who’s qualified to be the head.”

*Tap tap.*

HaYoon’s finger lightly tapped the surface of her desk as she continued to speak to herself.

“Then all I have to do is... bring my ta~lented little brother of the same blood back home with me.”

With nothing but evidence of his skills, she was amicably calling YuSung, a boy whom she had had no contact with for twelve years, her little brother.



“Won’t that be fun?”

HaYoon stared at a photo of YuSung, taken from a news article, and chuckled darkly. Then she turned back to the screen and began to talk.



“...How’s about it, YuSung-ah? I think we’re going to be the best of siblings.”

Right around the time that the Selectios were coming to a close...

YuSung was sitting in an office prepared by the Association.

‘I wonder what they want me for? The proceedings regarding the winner have already ended as well.’

Face set in a serious expression, YuSung was dropping sugar cubes into his cup. The black tea that the Association had prepared for him was much too bitter.

He tasted the concoction and nodded, satisfied only after the beverage had been reduced to nothing but sugar with a hint of tea.

‘Delicious.’

While he was enjoying sucrose-in-a-cup, Mei Lin opened the door to the office and stepped in.

She greeted him respectfully. “Congratulations on your victory, Student Shin YuSung.”

He grinned. “Thank you very much.”

“The reason as to why I prepared a separate place to talk to you with was to offer you a raid request.”

“Is that so... does that mean this is another request relating to Academy City?”

The last time he had been there, he had gotten the task of defeating the lake dragon. It had become a great opportunity for his party member, EunAh, to grow.

But Mei Lin shook her head.

“No. The one giving the request this time is the head office of the Association. The destination being the Castel of Phantasms in Japan.”

“That means this is...”

An expedition raid.

YuSung had already heard from Sumire that the representative chosen by the Selection would be sent by the Association on one.

The reasoning behind it, on the surface, was for the sake of unity and cooperation between countries. But that was not actually the case. The expedition raids were more like opportunities for the hunters going to scope out and experience any peculiarities or distinct teaching methods employed by the other country.

“...So this means I’ll have to go on an expedition in Japan?”

*Nod.*

Mei Lin then revealed the actual identity of the one who had requested the raid.

“The Association President strongly wishes for you to take the job, Student Shin YuSung.”

Kang YuChan. One of the Fist King’s, Yu WonHak’s, irreplaceable comrades. It was a request that YuSung couldn’t refuse.

In fact, it was one that he didn’t even *have* a reason to refuse in the first place. The opportunity to go on an expedition to Japan was too good to pass up.

“I understand.”

The woman smiled at YuSung’s enthusiastic assent. Soon after, information regarding the job popped up as a hologram above his Pocket.

**[Boss Subjugation Request]**

**[Habitat: Castle of Phantasms]**

[Boss Name: Succubus Queen]

[Difficulty: Rank 5]

[Two Participants]

[Time Limit: X]

YuSung slowly pored over the contents, eyes stopping at the line detailing the number of participants. The Academy City manager smiled lightly at his reaction.

“The total number of participants will be four; two will be from Korea.”

“Then does that mean the other two are...?”

“Yes, I’d wager they’ll be from the representative team from Japan.”

Mei Lin had previously had the chance to see Choten Academy’s students for herself.

Seiji, who used shadow arts...

Sakura, the archer in full bloom...

Kirishima Isshin, Choten’s samurai...

They were the best of the best in Japan, geniuses that were as skilled as those grandiose labels suggested.

But in Mei Lin’s—an active hunter’s—opinion, skill wasn’t necessarily what was going to be the most important during that raid.

What was going to be important was cooperation.

‘Of course, I don’t think Shin YuSung will get pushed around by the Japan party, but... ’

The Japan team had its own strategies, their own pace they followed. Considering that, it would be impossible for one party to completely defer to the other's lead.

‘Will both parties be able to work together in the dungeon despite their differences?’

It was something that could only be achieved if one had the sort of popularity that made others follow them, or if they had overwhelming charisma that swept up the other team members. In other words, important qualities that made a good leader.

“I’ll start right away.”

But YuSung accepted the request enthusiastically. He had always had confidence in himself.

# Chapter 72

Italian International Portal Zone...

*Wmmm!*

A lone figure could be seen stepping out of the shining lights. Those who were waiting quickly swarmed her.

“Is it true that you’re going to participate in the International Competition as Italy’s representative?”

“Why did you leave Korea and return to your home country?”

“Is it because you were second place in Korea’s Selections?”

Questions in fluent Italian spilled out from the group. However, the bodyguards hired by the Association stopped them from advancing any further.

‘Italy... ’

Even as all attention was laid on her, Adela looked slowly at her surroundings. She hadn’t come back to her home country in a long while.

The reason she had was clear: To participate in the International Competition that YuSung was in.

To fight him once again, she had to become a representative herself. Korea’s Selections had ended, but Italy’s hadn’t. In fact, they was about to take place soon.

Fairness, rules, or complicated procedures. All were useless to Adela.

Her return to Italy was a welcomed hot topic for the entire country. The Association also chose to let that girl with incredible skills participate in the Selections, even if it might cause an uproar.

‘...Because the ones who asked me to return *was* the Association.’

Adela let out a long sigh.

“Please, we’d appreciate an answer!”

“Are you actually going to participate in the Selections?”

She closed her eyes, ignoring all of the loud questions heading her way.

‘There’s no time to waste.’

Keeping the day when she would fight against YuSung as a promise to her heart, Adela confidently strode out of the portal zone.

\* \* \*

Metro City Hospital. The place she had visited regularly for the past few years...

But EunAh looked different from usual. A thin t-shirt that she normally wouldn’t have been caught dead wearing outside the house... A face straining to maintain its composure... She seemed nervous.

“You must be cold... at least wear my jacket.”

EunAh shook her head at SuHyun’s worried tone.

“It’s alright. I’m fine.”

*Beep.*

SuHyun pressed the button for the elevator. The time it took for the



elevator to come down was usually so insignificant that EunAh never thought about it. But that day, it felt like an eternity.

‘My brother. My brother is really... ’

The more she thought about it, the dizzier she felt.

When was the last time she had exchanged a conversation with him? It was two years ago, on, undoubtedly, a day as peaceful as any other day.

[It’s fine. You’re busy, brother, you don’t have to come... I’m sure Dad will send in any old person.]

Even as she said those words, EunAh had been sulking. She was her class’s representative for Sports Day for a sparring event due to her fantastic Trait and outstanding skills.

Her parents were as busy as they always were, so they were a wash. Her brother, however, had promised EunAh that he would come and watch. She had been looking forward to it.

[I’m sorry, EunAh. It’s my graduating class, so...]

But the results were always the same.

[...Don’t apologize. You make it sound like I was actually excited about you coming here. What am I, a kid?]

She had felt like an idiot back then for getting disappointed. She wouldn’t have put on those airs back then if she knew that was the last time she would talk with him, though.

She would’ve instead thrown a tantrum, demanding him to come over and watch her on Sports Day, to not take the dangerous raid job.

Of course, no matter how much she regretted her actions, the results would stay the same. Kim JunHyuk, EunAh’s brother, went berserk due to overuse of supplements, and eventually fell into a coma.

From then on, time for EunAh and JunHyuk had stood still.

‘My head hurts... ’

Her skull was pounding, and her stomach was also performing somersaults, possibly due to her nervousness.

“Young Miss... are you really alright?” asked SuHyun, concerned.

EunAh pinched her forehead with her fingers and nodded. “Yeah, I’m okay.”

“...I understand.”

She fell even deeper into her thoughts.

She couldn’t recall what sort of conversations she and her brother used to have, nor what to say to him.

At first, she couldn’t believe it.

The fact that this had happened to her brother, who she had talked to just a short while ago.

Then she felt shame.

—For the fact that he used supplements, which were dangerous to use even once, countless times.

Then she felt longing.

When she was five years old...

[EunAh, this flower is pretty, isn’t it?”

[Yeah, it is!]

[It’s called, repeat after me. Edelweiss!]

[Edelweiss!]

[Do you know what the flower language for edelweiss is?]

[Me? I dunno.]

[It means 'precious memories'.]

[Precious memories...]

[I'm cool, right?]

[Yeah! You are!]

[Next time I have something to apologize to you about, I'll bring you these flowers.]

[Flowers? Why?]

[Idiot. Isn't it cooler to do that than it is to just apologize with my words?]

Six years old...

[Everyone's so mean. Mom, dad, grandpa. Everyone. Today's my birthday...]

[It can't be helped. They're busy.]

[It just means they think work is more important than me.]

[Adults are supposed to be like that.]

[How about you, brother? Will you be like that when you become an adult?]

[Me? Uh... who knows?]

[Pewish.]

Fourteen...

[Congratulations on getting into middle school, dearest EunAh.]

[Why did you come here in person? So embarrassing, I'm not a child...]

[You totally are one. If you got a problem with it, come on over to high school already. I'll treat you like an adult then.]

[The heck? You won't even be there by the time I get there.]

Memories passed her by.

It was practically a given that she would feel a sense of longing. The only family member that EunAh could rely on was JunHyuk. Most of her precious memories were spent with him.

It was why she was so afraid of the kindness YuSung was showing her. As she got closer to her fellow comrades and party members, the emotion at the forefront of her mind, instead of ones like happiness or joy, was worry.

Worry that she would be betrayed again, that the people she opened up to would leave like her brother had done—she kept putting walls up around her heart for the same reasons.

*Stomp stomp.*

At some point, EunAh arrived at the door.

SuHyun bowed her head towards the other girl instead of following her in.

“I'll be waiting outside, Young Miss.”

EunAh didn't respond and just gave a single nod with her head.

*Vmm.*

The doors to the hospital room opened without needing to input a password.

And laying on the bed was JunHyuk, who was giving her a wane smile.

“...EunAh.”

She sat on the chair and stilled, staring at her brother.

“...Mhm.”

A conversation with a two-year-long gap...

EunAh had so much she wanted to say. It was why the words had an even harder time coming out. Should she greet him like nothing had happened or curse him, blame him for everything? She couldn't pull an answer out of her tumultuous thoughts.

She finally spoke, making sure to choose her words carefully. “I... that is, I mean, the me from two years ago... I thought I knew you r-really well... back then.”

It felt like she was on the edge of a cliff, on the verge of falling off. EunAh herself had a hard time figuring out her own emotions about the situation.

She couldn't forgive the fact that JunHyuk had used supplements for his hunter career all the way from back when he was a student. How dare he cling onto other people's expectations so tightly, to the point where he threw his own self away?

It was incredibly idiotic.

It was pathetic.

Whenever she returned home and looked over her brother's tidy, cleaned room, she felt unending resentment.

But she also felt delighted. Delighted by the fact that she could see him face-to-face again, speak to him again.

"But you, oppa..."

EunAh glared at her brother with shaking eyes.

"...Yeah, you're right. All of this? For that?"

JunHyuk laughed self-deprecatingly.

Then he stretched out his hand, took out a glass jar with a single, fake flower in it, and handed it over to her.

EunAh wasn't very knowledgeable about flowers, but that one she knew.

She couldn't forget it, rather.

The name of the white flower was the 'edelweiss'.

Its flower language meant...

"I'm sorry."

Her bother weakly rasped out his apology.

EunAh's shoulders sank down, then they began to lightly shake. Her eyes were turning redder and redder. She began to mutter, furious.

"Dimwit... moron... sniff! Stupid idiot... urgh, dumbass... moron..."

EunAh began spewing a barrage of insults towards JunHyuk, breath hitching in an effort to hold her tears in. Even among her emotional turmoil, she made sure to call him a moron twice.

“And... you said that, sniff, when you give me the flower... it’s supposed to be given *instead* of the apology. You can’t... even remember that? I remember everything...”

She didn’t stop her speech even as tears began to fall from her eyes.

JunHyuk, seeing that, placed his hand on her head and began to gently pet her.

“Urgh, ghk... waaah!”

EunAh’s emotions, bottled up until that point, began to overflow alongside her tears.



JunHyuk didn't feel too good watching her cry.

Eventually...



“Haha... it looks like you don’t remember *everything*, though. Didn’t I tell you that you’re only supposed to cry when...”

“When you’re dead... sniff, don’t give me that bullcrap...”

He tried to bring up the memories they had when she was nine as a way to cut the tension, but EunAh wasn’t having it.

For five minutes. For 300 continuous seconds, she continued to sob. Only after did she aim her reddened eyes towards her brother.

“...You took a break for two years and made me suffer.” Her voice was hoarse from all the crying. “So... It’s your turn to work from now on, oppa.”

JunHyuk laughed, bemused.

“Huh? What are you talking about...”

“Take all of the boring lessons you need to become the next heir. Take the position, too. And work related to the company. Take all of it... oppa.”

JunHyuk stared at his little sister in lieu of a response.

Seeing that, EunAh glared at him even harder in a displeased manner. “I’m gonna goof off.”

“...Th-that so?” He could do nothing but laugh at the situation.

EunAh wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “Yeah... I’m not gonna do any of that stuff.” Her voice was confident. “Sniff... I’m going to find a hot guy, marry him, then spend a bunch of money.”

A shocking declaration from JunHyuk’s younger sister.

The sinner, JunHyuk, had no choice but to smile at the sight of EunAh with her puffed-up eyes.

# Chapter 73

Early morning, in the clubroom...

*Plip. Shhhhhhhhhh!*

The sound of rain outside was deafening. A swath of blue blanketed everything outside in a blue glow. YuSung was looking outside the window while sitting on a chair.

He was used to that kind of scenery. Something about it, however, made him feel different emotions from usual.

‘What a nice sound.’

The raindrops made a clear pitter-patter wherever they hit.

It was a bit of a miracle that YuSung would be so focused on the sound of rain. Ever since he was young, he disliked that sound. No, to be exact, he didn’t like the days when it rained.

A wet, dark sky...

The noise always made him recall bad memories.

[You won’t be able to survive in the Shin-oh family with an F-rank Trait, anyways.]

His father.

[Give up on becoming a hunter and live a normal life. That wouldn’t be too bad.]

His mother.

[YuSung-ah... How does it feel like to live as a mistake?... Hm? Tell me. What does it feel like?]

His sister.

[I feel as if these are drastic measures, but I suppose it can't be helped. I'm in favor of exiling him from the family.]

[All he'll be is food for those hyenas to lap up. Don't you agree?]

[I agree as well.]

[In any case, I feel sorry for the child, but... incredible, to think such a defect would be born from those two...]

And the people from his household.

Memories were fascinating things. Just when you thought you completely forgot, they wake up from their slumber and jump to the forefront of your head at the most insignificant triggers.

Thoughts like those disturbed YuSung's mind for a great deal of time. Even back when he was training on the mountain, it was the reason why he notably hated the days when it rained.

But it was different now.

The sound of rain that he wanted to plug his ears against, back when he was a kid, was nothing more than pleasant nowadays. YuSung smiled lightly and stuck a straw in his carton of banana-flavored milk.

*Stab.*

'Maybe... '

He never really had to prove his worth to himself, just to others. The more achievements he had under his belt, and the more effort and talent he displayed, the more YuSung believed in his own skill.

'I'm the one who's changing.'

It was a pretty obvious conclusion to come to if one thought about it.

After leaving Martial Spirits' Mountain, he met various people and slowly, steadily learned various things through them.

YuSung no longer pushed himself with excessive training. He learned how to take advantage of days with bad weather and relax, like what he was doing currently.

He also learned that there were many delicious foods in the world...

That people who looked strong on the outside also had their own insecurities and worries...

That people who looked weak on the outside could have an inner strength nestled inside them...

He learned all of those things through the experiences he had through meeting with other people.

*Sipp.*

YuSung savored the taste of his drink. The scent of banana filled his mouth, followed by an overwhelming sweetness.

Right then, someone opened the door to the clubroom.

*Crinkle, crinkle!*

The sound of plastic bags.

"春に為ったら～花見! (When it's spring～ it means flower-viewing time!)"

A familiar voice was singing the lyrics to a children's song in Japanese.

TL/N: The song in question is だんご3兄弟, or Three Dumpling Brothers.

"秋になったら～ 月見! (When it's fall～ it means moon-viewing time!)"

Her ecstatic humming stopped abruptly right when she reached YuSung.

"Hiek."

Sumire sucked her breath in as he saw the other occupant in the room. It seemed as if she hadn't even thought that anyone else would be in the clubroom this early during a weekend.

"S-s-so, you were... you were already here, Shin YuSung-ssi? It's really early..."

Embarrassed, Sumire coughed and scratched her cheek with a finger.

YuSung looked at the bag in her hand. "What's that?"

"Ah, today's menu is sukiyaki!" Sumire crouched down onto the ground and introduced its contents to him one by one. "This is shirataki... sukiyaki sauce. Lots of giant spring onions. Mushrooms... and beef for the meat!"

TL/N: Suki-yaki is a type of Japanese hotpot. Shirataki is konjac (a jelly-like food made from a yam plant of the same name) in string form.

Finished with her explanation, she glanced up at the other boy.

"...I-I prepared this thinking that a bunch of our party members would come over since it's the weekend, but, um... we're the only two here."

"Seems so."

Amy was usually quite busy due to her broadcasting schedule, so it wasn't out of the ordinary for her to not be here during the weekend.

But EunAh, who spent most of her weekends playing around, was also not at the clubroom, as her brother had woken up from his coma.

"A-and Lee SiWoo-ssi... said that something came up with his family. Too bad, all this food was prepared to celebrate your victory, Shin YuSung-ssi..."

Even since she was little, Sumire would eat hot pot with her family on special occasions. Her father, especially, had told her like a mantra that hot pot was only delicious if many people ate it together. She wasn't sure why that was the case, but it had become a ritual nonetheless.

"I-I was... planning to cook it slowly after you woke up... um, should I start preparing it right now, then? Sukiyaki is a little heavy for breakfast, but..."

"I'm good with that. I was just getting hungry, too. Thanks, Sumire."

"Huh?! N-no, it's nothing! Y-you helped me with so much more, Shin YuSung-ssi... and these ingredients were all bought with our budget... and I only became a Seven because of you!"

Sumire shook her head fiercely at YuSung's gratitude. She wasn't quite used to hearing other people expressing their thanks towards her, even if she was plenty used to giving thanks to others—especially if the person in question giving her the thanks was YuSung.

YuSung stretched his hand out towards her during the darkest era of her life, after 'that incident' in Japan, so even if she managed to find a way to shine on her own, there was no one who could take the place of YuSung in her heart. He was special in that way.

Considering that, It was no surprise that she wanted to express her gratitude.

"...Th-the only way I can be of help to you and repay you for everything is through my food, after all..."

Sumire let out a small smile as she said that. She always enjoyed eating meals with YuSung, especially when he ate the food she had

made herself.

*Plip.*

But YuSung stared at Sumire and began talking, voice serious.

"That's wrong."

"...Huh?"

The shock on Sumire's face was apparent. She inspected his face, trying to see any signs that she had displeased him in some way.

"Sumire, we're members of the same party. The reason I chose you was because I needed your help."

*Plip. Plop. Shhh.*

The rain was endless. The drops hitting the window harmonized well with YuSung's voice.

"The double raid at the Graveyard of Despair... Our win during the intramurals... Both would have been impossible without your contributions."

Sumire had always idolized YuSung. Even with his F-rank Trait, he easily accomplished every task in his way. He never gave up and was someone she could always rely on.

"A-am I really helpful...?"

The fact that she was of help to someone like that made her feel odd inside.

"Yes, you were a huge help, Sumire."

But YuSung stayed steadfast.

He believed there was no one in the world who could do everything

all by themselves. No one could live alone.

The reason why he endured his training on the mountain...

The reason why he managed to perform the fourth form of the Battle God Style, something he couldn't do even under the tutelage of the Fist King...

All of those things were possible because of the Fist King, his comrades, and the existence of opponents that he needed to beat.

"...So, let's keep helping each other. We're a party, after all."

From YuSung's perspective, those were his genuine sentiments.

Sumire, however, was experiencing quite a different set of emotions.

"Ooh... ooh... Shin YuSung-ssi..."

At some point, she had tears pooling in the corners of her eyes.

The girl kept muttering to herself while sniffing, touched by his words.

"Yes! I-I'll... keep trying harder... to be of help! I'll get stronger, and... I-I'll cook tastier food..."

\* \* \*

Some time later...

*Bubble bubble.*

They had set a butane stove on the table, and the hot pot was cooking on it. As the beef began to cook and brown, Sumire began her explanation of how to eat the dish.

"Pick it up with your chopsticks... and dip it in the raw eggs. Then eat."



TL/N: Raw egg in Korea and Japan are safe to eat.

YuSung, excited to try a new dish, followed her instructions right after. The meat, infused with the flavorful sukiyaki sauce, matched well with the mild, savory taste of the egg.

"This is so good."

He ate with gusto. Seeing that, Sumire began ladling tofu and more meat into his bowl.

She looked proud, somehow. A large grin was dancing on her face.

"...I-I made this a lot back in Japan! Normally, sukiyaki is... a dish that you eat with family."

"...With your family?" YuSung asked, a note of interest in his voice.

Sumire nodded. "Everyone... sits around a table and eats it together. We exchange a lot of small talk..."

She associated hot pot with many memories of her past. Of course, she had never even managed to taste any meat back then due to her younger siblings hogging it all for themselves. Even so, it was delicious.

"N-now that I think about it... it's been a while since I last saw my family."

Saying that, Sumire grabbed a slice of meat with her chopsticks. She dunked it in the raw egg, placed it in her mouth, and began to chew.

The food was delicious, but something about it tasted different from the hot pot she had eaten back then.

"It's really good... when you eat it with family."

"I see."

A dish you ate with your family...

‘...Family, huh?’

YuSung grabbed another slice of meat with his chopsticks.

Who was family to him?

The Shin-Oh family, who abandoned him back when he was five years old? No matter how much he thought about it, he couldn't consider them eligible.

The only person who he could really consider as part of his family was the Fist King.

Sumire had been separated from her own ever since she had come over to Korea as an exchange student. YuSung had some idea of what emotions Sumire was experiencing.

"Then it works out. Let's take this opportunity to visit your family."

"H-huh?" Sumire frantically waved her arms. "Um, it's alright?! Thank you for the consideration, but my family members live in Japan..."

"Didn't I tell you? Our next raid is going to be in Japan."

He nonchalantly grabbed another piece of meat as he said so. Sumire's eyes were as wide as dinner plates.

"H-huhhhhhh?! J-Japan?!" she repeated, bewildered.

YuSung fiddled with his Pocket to display the details of the request on a hologram.

**[Boss Subjugation Request]**

**[Habitat: Castle of Phantasms]**

**[Boss Name: Succubus Queen]**

[Difficulty: Rank 5]

[2 Participants]

[Time Limit: X]

“...Mhm. I wanted to at least discuss who was going to go during a meeting with everyone, but... the Castle of Phantasms has a lot of undead monsters, so I think you'll be a good fit, Sumire.”

EunAh, one of their most powerful members, couldn't leave the side of her brother who had recently awoken from a coma. Amy and SiWoo were both busy, the former because of her job and the latter due to his family.

"Th-then, that means...? Sh-Shin YuSung-ssi and I are going to go to Japan... by ourselves?"

Since Sumire was planning to visit her family at her house, they didn't even need the temporary lodgings that the Association had prepared for them.

"What do you think? You'll have to prepare for a bunch of things, but..."

The corner of Sumire's mouth shot up at his words as if she couldn't wait for the day to come.

'Shin YuSung-ssi... At my house... '

She wanted to meet her family and introduce YuSung to them as soon as possible.

'Th-this is totally like... '



Her face became redder and redder as she came to her own conclusions.

"Ha, hahu... huheeh..."

Reedy laughter began to spill from Sumire's lips as her imagination took her on a flight of fancy.

"Yes! S-sounds good! I definitely want to go! I can see my family again, and..."

"Good, then it's settled."

YuSung smiled and stabbed his straw in another carton of banana-flavored milk. Sumire, beside herself with giddiness, merely watched him do so, giggling all the while.

# Chapter 74

Japan, the Kanto region...

The country's greatest academy was situated in a national park in the Tochigi prefecture, a location known for its beauty.

Choten (頂点).

Meaning peak or summit, Choten Academy was the greatest school in the country, sweeping various competitions held all around Japan.

And among its first-year groups, the strongest was the Hunter Club. A peculiar group named for hunters in a school where every single student was one.

In Choten, only nine students were a part of said club. Thus, its members were the elite among the elite in Japan.

All three members of Seiji's party were said elites in the Hunter Club.

They were a group that had never tasted defeat before. However, during the competition in Korea, they had been pushed down to third place, beaten out by Adela, who had participated on her own.

"That guy, Shin YuSung! He's really incredible, you know! To defeat that Adela with an F-rank Trait!"

Seiji, the party leader, laughed boisterously while reading the article.

Sakura, who was sitting on top of a desk, smiled while waving her legs back and forth. "Hmm, that so? I never got a chance to see his skills, but his face was something else. Totally my type!"

Isshin creased his forehead as she followed up that statement with playful laughter.

“...Take this seriously, Sakura.”

In response, she made a thumbs-down motion behind Isshin's back.

"I saw that."

Sakura sneakily lowered her hand at his retort.

"But we can take this chance to see his skills. Isn't that a good thing? Since we can see the competition up close if we do the raid together," she said in a sincere tone.

Then, as if telling Isshin to listen to her, she added: "Don't misunderstand me, I wasn't talking about his look~ I was talking about his skills, okay~?"

“...Don't say anything unnecessary," was the temperamental Isshin's response.

Seiji laughed, trying to mediate between the two.

"It's true, this is a great opportunity we can take to prepare for the International Competition. And it's the same for them, too!"

Hearing that, Sakura tossed her hair behind her. The strands of her hair trailing behind her hand in the air looked like the floating petals of a cherry blossom flower.

"You're no fun. Anyways, who's the other party member coming with him?"

Seiji immediately opened his mouth to respond to her question. "Um, according to the rumors, I heard that the person who's the third in student rankings is a part of Shin YuSung's party."

"Hmm, so it's the third place who's coming, as expected." Sakura grimaced. "But isn't she a girl? Ugh~ too bad~ they're totally gonna be all lovey-dovey together."

Isshin slowly rose from his spot.

"...It doesn't matter who they are, as long as they're strong enough for me to entrust my back to," he declared, putting his airs up.

Sakura, still behind him, copied what he said.

'It doesn't matter~ who dey aw~'

"Pfft!"

A fit of laughter escaped from Seiji's mouth at her exaggerated imitation.

Isshin placed his hand on his side as if reaching for a sword that wasn't there.

"I already told you I can see what you're doing, didn't I?"

*Slip.*

Once again, Sakura backed away and pretended to not do anything. The two frequently antagonized each other as if they were trying to eat the other up.

The one who managed to find a balance between the two was the party leader, Seiji.

"Okay, then! Let's go and greet our guests now, shall we?"

He patted both of their backs and grinned brightly.

\* \* \*

Tochigi prefecture, Japan...

YuSung and Sumire had exited the portal. Sumire's mood had noticeably heightened as she stepped back onto Japanese soil



"Shin YuSung-ssi! Th-this! This Dango is really delicious!"

What she held in her hand were rice cakes on a skewer, called Dango. She was carrying a bunch of Dango in both hands, all slathered in various sauces, in order to let YuSung taste all of the flavors.

"This is soy sauce! This is miso! And this is honey!"

TL/N: Miso is a savory soybean paste.

YuSung tasted each skewer, one by one, as they walked towards their destination.

‘...They toasted the rice cake? Genius.’

Even random snack foods like those touched him deeply. Uplifted by his reaction, Sumire went here and there, bringing back more food with her every time.

"H-here! There's also takoyaki!"

TL/N: Takoyaki is fried dough balls that's mixed with various ingredients, with octopus inside the ball.

Once...

"Th-these are... chick-shaped Manju! I-I bet you won't even be able to eat these because of how cute they are!"

TL/N: Manju are buns that are usually filled with anko, or red bean paste.

Twice...

"There's a ramen shop over there!"

Three times...

YuSung, who had a bottomless pit in his stomach despite his lean

figure, and Sumire, who kept suggesting him different foods. They were quite the sight.

Their delightful walk eventually reached its end as they arrived at the national park.

The two sat down on a wooden bench and began speaking with each other.

“I... I think I got too excited. I can’t... eat anymore.”

YuSung was holding a chocolate-covered banana in his hand. “That was fun.”

Sumire grinned bashfully at that, obviously in a good mood. It was the sort of smile she would never have made before meeting him.

“...I was really w-worried before I came here, but... It must have been nothing.”

“Worried?”

Sumire wiggled her fingers in response to his question, deep in thought.

“It’s just...”

But she didn’t clarify. Sumire didn’t know why exactly, but she wanted to hide the weak-willed and wicked part of herself from him for as long as she possibly could.

“A-a lot of things!” she answered, forcing a smile on her face.

Japan was where she had grown up and where her family currently was, but the thought of it made Sumire recall a plethora of bad memories.

‘I... ran away from Japan.’

[Because of you, our teacher...!]

[Shit! I can't believe I'm in the hospital because of an idiot like you!]

[Just... what the hell was Isshin thinking with a girl like that...]

The bullying from her classmates felt like a given, the more she thought about it. The reason the incident happened in the first place was that she went berserk. All she could feel was apologetic for the damage she had caused.

She felt that things would be different after meeting YuSung. Still, Sumire held the overwhelming burden of her past deeds in the corner of her heart.

‘Is it alright for someone like me... to be happy?’

YuSung could find a good party member, someone who wasn't her. Someone as strong and virtuous as him had the right to do so.

‘Do I... even have the right to be here?’

The more she chased her thoughts around, the lower her mood sank. Those questions, long familiar to Sumire, began cutting her self-confidence down.

“Sumire?” YuSung called, sitting right next to her.

“Yes?!” She was shaken up from her musings being interrupted so suddenly.

“It's time to go to Choten.”

Sumire tightly pressed her lips together at the mention of the Academy. Choten, where Japan's representatives would be waiting. It was time for her to face the past that she had run away from.

A hospital room in Metro Hospital...

JunHyuk was laying in bed, waiting for his last batch of treatments. EunAh, right next to him, told him about all of the things that had happened in the past two years.

“And we did the intramurals in the Shinsung water park. Oh, yeah, you didn’t forget the place, right? You remember? We went there together before.”

“Course I do.” He nodded, smiling.

A deadpan expression on her face, EunAh gave her brother a look.

“You know, you’re making me depressed all~ over again.”

“...Darn, sorry.”

EunAh’s look turned into a glare. “Is that the face of someone who’s actually sorry?”

“Anyways, EunAh.” JunHyuk scratched his head, abruptly changing the conversation. “I wanted to ask you since I’m really curious, but...”

“What.” Her lips were pursed.

JunHyuk continued, an air of awkwardness around him. “I heard you joined a party?”

“Huh? How did you hear about that?”

EunAh had been surreptitiously avoiding any stories regarding her party up to that point. JunHyuk, however, had already heard about it from someone else.

“Haha, from Lee SuHyun-ssi...”

“...Just how much did you hear?”

“Up to the part where your party leader saved my life?”

“That so?”

EunAh hmm’ed.

‘Fair enough, that’s pretty important stuff.’

And just when she was about to brush the whole thing aside, JunHyuk opened his mouth to add:

“She also told me that you guys slept in a tent overnight together?”

EunAh’s face reddened. “That means you heard everything! God! A-and, for the record, there was another girl there! Why do you guys keep leaving her out?!”

JunHyuk burst out laughing as he watched his sister work herself up.

Eventually, he managed to calm down, settling on a lazy smile.

“...Still, I’m really thankful to him. I can’t believe he fought against Rebellion when he was just a student.”

“Well... it’s why I joined his party. I gotta repay my debts, right? ‘Course, I’ll only be in it until the end of the International Competition...”

EunAh laid the top half of her body on the hospital bed. JunHyuk reached out and patted her on the head, a grin on his face.

‘...We really are family, huh.’

He and his sister were incredibly alike. They both had strong egos that hid fragile hearts. Even the fact that they were awful at opening themselves up first was similar.

“So, uh, EunAh?”

“Yeah?”

“I want to personally thank the person who I owe my life, but...”

As the older brother, JunHyuk thought that it was his turn to open himself up in his little sister’s stead.

“Where is he...? Your party leader, Shin YuSung?”

“Japan.” EunAh curtly replied.

“...Japan?” He was shocked at how far the distance was between him and YuSung.

“Yeah. Not a place a guy who’s been hospitalized should be going, so calm the hell down and rest. Got it?”

JunHyuk could only smile awkwardly at the violent glare she aimed at him.

Two years... a completely blank period for him, during which he couldn’t meet with his sister. But now that they were face-to-face, he could see that she had grown immeasurably strong in many ways.

\* \* \*

At Choten Academy’s entrance...

The three members of the Hunter Club were sitting on stone benches, placed to give a great view of the natural scenery while waiting for YuSung.

Seiji checked his Pocket. “It’s almost time.”

Sakura immediately leapt up from her seat. “Isshin,” she began, “don’t speak in Japanese like last time. It’s impolite, especially since your Korean’s pretty good, anyways.”

Isshin clicked his tongue, not a fan of her nor her suggestion.

Language barriers were a thing of the past, thanks to the existence of Pockets. However, back in the day, before Pockets existed, humans needed an [official language] for ease of communication with each other.

The process to choose said official language was simple. That is, whichever language belonged to the country that had the most influence over the Tower. Thanks to that process, the country that was chosen was Korea, which had discovered much of the technology and techniques used in Pockets.

Because South Korea itself had so many gates and dungeons, it could pump out hunters of larger quantity and higher quality, letting them dominate the conquest of the Tower.

The calamitous Outbreak that all people considered misfortune of the highest caliber had, ironically, heightened the strength of the nation in the international sphere.

In the current age, there were plenty of hunters from different countries who were also conquering the Tower. But by that point, the Korean language had already firmly cemented itself as the official language on the planet.

Seiji smiled. “Yeah, there’s no point in needlessly provoking them when your Korean is perfectly fine. We’re going to raid a dungeon as a party from now on, after all.”

As he said that, they could see a figure walking towards them in the distance.

*Step step.*

It was none other than YuSung, wearing the Gaon Academy uniform.

Sakura, who had been grinning ear to ear, saw the person next to YuSung. She immediately turned shocked.

“Huh?”

Now that she thought about it, there were three members from Gaon during the dungeon raid competition. The students from Choten, however, had only remembered YuSung and Adela.

“Gaon’s last party member is...”

Even their leader, Seiji, was bemused. He chanced a glance towards Isshin.

Their surprise was to be expected. To think that the other party member was Japanese... and such a familiar face, to boot.

“...The hell?”

Isshin’s murmuring drew Sakura and Seiji’s eyes to him like magnets. The boy in question stood up, a grim look on his face.

Sumire, who looked as if she had been anticipating this all along, had kept her mouth shut tight this entire time.

“I-I...”

She finally opened it to speak, but her words faded out.

*Bam!*

Isshin slammed his hand against the wall loud enough to make a sound. With eyes full of contempt, he glared down at Sumire.

“Why are you...?”





# Chapter 75

A disdainful gaze, as if looking down upon a bug.

“...Hanajima Sumire. You have quite the nerve.”

Isshin's voice was cold enough to freeze someone instantly in place.

Sumire's entire body was coiled up and tense as if she had expected that reaction all along, and that fact enraged Isshin even more.

“...What, did you become mute during the time we didn't see each other? Come on, at least give me a reply. You have a mouth, don't you?”

“I-I... I...”

She tried to continue but stopped. Isshin's grimace grew deeper at the sight.

*Poke.*

He lifted the index finger on his left hand and stabbed Sumire's forehead with it.

“...Yeah, I bet you don't have anything to say since you're the sort of person who would betray her party members and run away to Korea.”

Sakura sneered as she watched the display as if tired of the whole song and dance.

“Pfft, there he goes again. I can't believe he's pulling this crap in high school!”

“Oi! Isshin, cut it out! Don't fight with a guest...”



Even his leader, Seiji, tried to stop him, but Isshin kept going.

“...The reason why I let you into my party... Why I let you borrow my hair for your disgusting little power... It was all out of goodwill

because I pitied you... All of it.”

Sumire turned her eyes down to avoid his gaze.

Isshin glanced between her and YuSung, then sneered. “Looks like you’re going to the International Competition at this rate.”

Isshin pressed himself closer to Sumire and spoke in a quiet tone. “Don’t tell me, Hanajima, that you think... you got here due to your own skill, do you?”

He continued to spew more insults. “...Maybe the actual skill you have is your ability to look pathetic so that you can latch onto people who are strong.”

“I-I...”

Sumire kept repeating the word like a broken record. Isshin didn’t even blink.

“You’re just like a parasite.” He lifted his left index finger again. “... Oi, Hanajima.”

He poked her in the forehead again.

*Poke.*

“First Japan.”

*Poke.*

“Now Korea.”

*Poke.*

“Where are you going to go next?”

Sumire couldn’t speak up, even as Isshin continued to interrogate her.

Her stomach churned. As she thought, it was hard trying to face her past.

The only thing on her mind before her transfer was her desire to escape the uncomfortable situation she was in. She didn't even think about the feelings of the party members she left behind.

Sumire's heart was much too frail to endure a direct confrontation between her and the people who had hurt her in the past.

"I... I just..."

*Plip. Plip.*

Tears began to stream down her face at the other boy's insistence.

Isshin made a move to poke her in the forehead once more.

"Are you trying to answer me, or are you gonna ask another question... urk!"

Squeeze.

But YuSung grabbed his finger with his hand. Isshin's face twisted in pain as the other boy began to apply pressure.

"Keuk..."

"Stop it."

Even as YuSung's demeanor was as calm as ever, the aura he exuded was oppressive enough to stop the people in his surroundings in their tracks.

"Y-you... what do you know?!"

Isshin swatted the hand away and backed off. He grimaced. YuSung had only grabbed his finger for a brief period of time, but the grip strength was strong enough to send a shiver down his entire body.

“This is between! The two of us...”

But YuSung ignored him and instead stood in front of Sumire.

“It doesn’t matter what happened between the two of you,” he retorted, voice quiet and calm.

Sumire’s hands grabbed tightly onto YuSung’s clothes, even as they were violently shaking. Isshin’s glare grew even deadlier at the sight.

But the one fighting him was YuSung, not Sumire.

“Sumire came here as a representative of Korea in order to raid the Castle of Phantasms.”

YuSung didn’t grow angry. Instead, he stared at the other boy, making sure to suppress his emotions as much as possible.

“As the leader of her party, I won’t allow any more disrespect done to her.”

“Hanajima is Japanese first, and Korea’s representative second... haah, fine. I’ll stop for now.”

Isshin clicked his tongue at Sumire as if deeming her not worth the effort.

He spun towards the exit. “It’s not like I’d be able to trust my back to a traitor, anyways.”

“Isshin, you...” Seiji stretched out his hand in an effort to stop Isshin from leaving.

“Stop it, Seiji.” But Sakura interrupted him. “Just let him go, I’ll participate.”

Seiji, frazzled. Sakura, composed.

Isshin eventually left the building. Seiji then began apologizing to

Sumire and YuSung.

“...I’m sorry, we showed you guys, the representatives of Korea, something so unsightly. I especially need to apologize to you, Sumi... no, Hanajima-san.”

TL/N: -san is an honorific used in Japanese to refer to people of a similar standing to you in a formal manner. e.g. Your classmates, co-workers, etc.

It seemed like the two already knew each other from their middle school years. Their point of contact was, of course, Isshin.

Sumire shook her head weakly. “N-no. It’s true that... it’s my fault... I ran away from Japan without even a word to my party members...”

“Hmm... we managed to get a hot guy, but this uggo completely ruined the mood... eugh.” Sakura sighed.

Seiji took the opportunity to move the conversation back to safer waters—something he was plenty used to doing. “Well, no helping it, then. Let’s form a party with us four!”

“Yeah, sounds good.” Sakura winked. “How about we end it here for today~? It doesn’t look like any of us are up for making a plan, after all.”

\* \* \*

And with that, the other Choten students left. Only YuSung and Sumire were left.

“I-I’m sorry... Shin YuSung-ssi... Because of me...”

Sumire had lost the strength in her legs and was sitting on the ground with her knees pulled up to her chest. The excited countenance she had shown at the beginning of their trip to Japan had been replaced with a completely different, listless one.

“...A-as I thought, it would’ve been better if someone like me didn’t go

to Japan..." she said, smiling bitterly.

Only then did YuSung realize why Sumire's confidence had been so low back when they had first met—her past memories of middle school had etched deep grooves in her heart.

"It's alright."

"Eh, huh?"

"We only came here to raid the Castle of Phantasms. Nothing's changed in that aspect."

Sumire nodded weakly at the other boy's level-headed words. Even in situations like those, her party leader, Shin YuSung, was someone who she could rely on. That was his own form of providing her comfort.

*Plop.*

YuSung sat down on the ground right next to Sumire. The distance between them suddenly shrank. Flustered, Sumire gulped.

"...Sh-Shin YuSung-ssi?"

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eyes.

Sumire's lips began to tremble. For whatever reason, her face was getting redder and redder.

"Th-the... yes?"

She had fully broken down at that point, tongue tripping over her words.

Still, YuSung's tone was calm. "Sumire, do you remember what you told me... back in the clubroom?"

His words managed to bring her senses back online. The moment in question had happened right before they had traveled to Japan. There



was no need for Sumire to even search her memories.

“The clubroom... do you mean the day we ate sukiyaki?”

To Sumire, sukiyaki was a dish she ate on special occasions. She had introduced the dish to YuSung by saying that it tasted even better when it was eaten with family as you talked amongst each other.

“Yep.”

YuSung smiled lightly.

He himself had also gotten help from his comrades and had learned things from them.

Twelve years of training on Martial Spirits’ Mountain...

Sumire had taught YuSung, who had no family, something he could never learn on his own during the meal they shared together.

—People are bound to change through other people. YuSung’s comrades had influenced him as well, even with the small things.

Only after spending time together with them did he realize that it was more entertaining to be in a group than by himself.

“I was thinking, back then... If I ever get to eat this dish again, who should I eat it with?”

No matter how much he thought about it, the only person who he could call family was the Fist King. It would be really fun if they got together for a meal for the first time in a long while and swapped stories about what happened after YuSung left the mountain. He was certain of that.

But... That meal would only be shared between two people.

If he had to choose more people as his family after the Fist King, who would it be?

His parents, who abandoned him?

Shin HaYoon, his sister?

The Shin-Oh family?

They may have the same blood running through their veins, but YuSung could never consider them family by his own standards. The family he dreamed of would never cast any of its members aside for a reason like their Trait.

“No matter how much and how long I think about it, the only other people that come to mind are you guys.”

“Ehh?! Th-then, w-we’re...”

Sumire was so taken aback by his words that her face had shot past the reddening mark and had begun heating up.

They weren’t wrong in any sense. To YuSung, who had no family, the people closest to him were his master, the Fist King, and his comrades—the members of his party.

But Sumire took his words differently.

‘Sh-Shin YuSung-ssi is part of my... family?’

She tried to stay as calm as she could, but it was impossible. Her explosive imagination had already decided on the names of her and YuSung’s children. She had completely forgotten what had just happened with Isshin.

YuSung continued on, tone sincere, as Sumire tried to hold her delighted grin back. He stared right at her.

“Yes, we are. That’s how important my party members and comrades are to me.”

Sumire stared right back at YuSung. Even as her heart was pounding

so fast that it felt like it would burst, the other boy spoke evenly.

“Which is why I won’t be disappointed in you, Sumire, for something like that. I won’t send you back to Korea, either.”

Perhaps the image of an ideal family that YuSung had was one where its members would always stand by each other’s sides, no matter what.

“...That’s what family’s about, right?”

YuSung’s smile took on a melancholic edge.

Only then did Sumire realize.

[...So let’s keep helping each other. We’re a party, after all.]

On that day...

The words he spoke to her, telling her that she was of help to him, were the truth. Hee wasn’t just talking about how she had helped with the dungeon raid competition, nor the intramurals.

*Plip plip.*

Sumire had been made fun of for being a crybaby ever since she was little. But that day, specifically, she felt that it was unfair. Anyone would cry after realizing that they were of help to the person they admired.

The tears spilling from her eyes were different from her usual ones—they had been created because she was deeply moved. Sumire opened her mouth in order to say something, then snapped it back shut.

*Press.*

She softly bit her lip and looked at the boy sitting next to her. The YuSung that she had watched up to that point in time was a virtuous boy who was kind to everyone. She knew that he didn’t act that way

solely towards her.

But...

*Sniff.*

Sumire loudly sniffed her nose, then slowly nodded her head.

“I-If you’re alright with someone, sob, like me...”

Her face seemed happy, even amidst all of the crying. Only then did YuSung relax.

“Sniff! A-and... I’ll introduce you to my family, YuSung-ssi! They even told me that... they prepared sukiyaki, after all.”

Sumire grinned bashfully, eyes red and swollen from her tears. YuSung matched her with a bashful grin of his own.

‘...I’m looking for to it. The sukiyaki.’

# Chapter 76

*Step. Step.*

A dungeon used for training...

Isshin, after leaving Choten, aimlessly wandered throughout the long mountain range.

“Grrr...”

“Bark, bark! Grr!”

Wild dogs the size of bears swarmed him, lured by his scent.

*Dash!*

They made their move and pounced on him. Isshin placed his hand on his scabbard.

“Growl!”

*Chomp!*

The dog's teeth bit the boy square on the arm... Except that wasn't his actual body.

Fshh!

His form scattered as an afterimage. The giant dogs scanned the area, drool dripping out of their mouths.

Only then did his body become visible.

*Slash!*

All of the monsters were cut clean in half. Blood sprayed everywhere. Isshin stared at their corpses with a cold gaze before flicking the blood off his blade.

“...Tch.”

He clicked his tongue and sat on a nearby boulder.

Isshin couldn't focus on his training. It felt odd.

‘This is all because of Hanajima. That stupid girl...’

He thought back to his middle school years.

Sumire had been her quiet, introverted self for as long as he'd known her. She was the sort of person who would grin like an idiot even as the people around her used her. The only impression he had of her back then was nothing more than an ‘annoying woman’.

Perhaps that was the reason why he had been so pissed off when they had been paired off by coincidence for a test. Middle-school Isshin treated her even more coldly than he had before.

[...Just why did it have to be you, of all people?]

[I'm screwed... I hate idiotic, frustrating women like you.]

But the one who made a mistake during the actual test had been Isshin. He had stepped on a trap that shot an arrow towards him from his side. Thankfully, it had only grazed his forearm.

*Plip. Plop.*

Blood had begun to flow from the wound.

Isshin may have been in middle school back then, but he had been living his entire life for the sake of becoming a hunter. He wasn't the sort of person who was sensitive enough to be thrown off by the sight of blood.

In fact, Sumire was the one who made a big deal about the wound.

[K-Kirishima-ssi! Th-there's blood!]

#TL/N: it says -ssi in the korean but since she's in japan she should technically be using japanese honorifics.

[...A wound of this caliber is nothing.]

[Th-that's no good!]

It was the first time Isshin had seen her angry. She had endured every insult he had thrown at her without complaint, yet the first time she had blown up was because he had been hurt.

Dumbfounded, Isshin let out a snort, amused.

[Okay, then. What are you gonna do about it? Do you wanna give up on the test just for a cut of this size?]

[No! I-I'll treat it! I brought a first-aid kit and everything!]

Right then and there, Sumire sat down and gave him first aid. She cleaned up all of the blood flowing out of the wound and disinfected it with a cotton ball soaked with alcohol. And in order to stop the bleeding, she placed a piece of gauze with ointment on the wound and wrapped it tightly on with compression bandages.

Only after finishing the entire process did Sumire's serious expression clear up. Her usual smile returned back to her face.

[All done!]

Isshin thought she was an idiot. Why would she worry about someone who had insulted her and called her an idiot to the point where she got angry in order to give him proper treatment?

He couldn't understand Sumire, no matter how hard he tried. He didn't want to.

[...You really are a weirdo, aren't you?]

And that's how the test ended.

Isshin and Sumire were in different classes, so they didn't have many opportunities to interact with each other. Still, she bothered him.

Why did looking at the blooming violets in their schoolyard make her smile so happily?

Why did she dazedly stare outside the window for long periods of time on rainy days?

Why did she constantly let herself be used like an idiot by others who foisted work they didn't want to do off of her?

Watching Sumire made Isshin angry. He felt frustrated. He felt like an idiot. His emotions towards her flipped on a dime, though he himself didn't know why.

[Hanajima. Join my party.]

[...I'll let you borrow my hair whenever you take a test.]

[No one in this school will be able to carelessly bother you. Whoever messes with you, messes with me.]

Sumire, stunned, could do nothing but nod at his proposal.

She knew the boy hated her, so she had no idea why he had invited her to his party. The only reason she had accepted was because she didn't have another party to join.

With Isshin's help, Sumire grew stronger, bit by bit.

'...And you run off to Korea without even a single word to me, Hanajima?'

He gritted his teeth.



While attending Choten, he had managed to gain the strongest party members—Seiji and Sakura. He still felt angry, however.

To Isshin, the reason as to why was obvious: it was because someone like Sumire had betrayed him.

As his thoughts reached this conclusion, YuSung's face suddenly appeared in his head.

‘...Korea's Shin YuSung.’

It just so happened that Korea was slated to be Japan's first opponent during the International Competition. Isshin made a face and sheathed his sword.

\* \* \*

Kunigami district on Okinawa island...

Sumire glanced towards YuSung as the two of them arrived at her house.

“Th-the portal...! So useful! We came here really fast, didn't we?”

It was a regular, two-story house one could find anywhere, even if it looked a little worn down. Sumire sucked in a breath right in front of the door.

“A-alright!”

In a sudden burst of courage, she pressed the doorbell.

*Ding-dong.*

The bell rang throughout the house. Not too long after, the window on the second floor opened up.

“来た (She's here)!”

”お姉ちゃんだ (It’s onee-chan!)

#TL/N: “big sis” in japanese.

Sumire’s younger siblings greeted her in Japanese. She waved back, a bright grin on her face—quite different from her usual expressions.

The front door slowly opened, and a woman stepped out of the house. With a smile on her face, she waved as well.

Sumire turned her attention towards her, and, with a bright grin on her face, ran towards the woman.

“Mom—!”

She was Hanajima Suika, Sumire’s mother.

“Fufu. Welcome home.”

The two held hands and stared into one another’s eyes. To YuSung, it felt like a warm energy was radiating off them.



“You’re Shin YuSung-ssi... right?”

Suika turned towards YuSung and addressed him in Korean. He smiled lightly and nodded.

“Yes, I am.”

“I’m Hanajima Suika. You’ve been taking quite good care of my daughter, I’ve heard. Fufu, my child is just~ like how I was when I was her age. So shy! We only call every once in a while, and most of it is dedicated to her talking about you! Geez~”

Sumire’s ears became redder and redder as her mother went on.

“S-stop it! Talk about that stuff... i-inside the house!”

Suika quietly smiled as she watched her daughter panic.

“Fufu, well, then. Shin YuSung-ssi... I hope you continue to look after her.”

She covered her mouth with a hand and laughed.

Sumire slowly shook her head, embarrassed.

“P-Party Leader-nim... already treats me much too kindly...”

Saying that, she threw a glance towards YuSung.

“Oho~ is that so?” Suika asked. There was a certain pressure coming off of her despite her kind eyes and smile.

“I’m also rather curious to know~ just how you’re treating my Sumire well! How about I hear all~ about that while we eat?”

Saying that, Suika gave YuSung one last greeting before heading back inside the house to finish preparations for the meal.

And just like that, a hurricane had come and gone by.

“They’re... a little rowdy, aren’t they?”

Sumire seemed to be embarrassed about introducing her family to YuSung.

“I think that’s what’s good about them.”

YuSung wasn’t just spouting platitudes. Until recently, he had spent his life a distance away from other people while training on Martial Spirits’ Mountain. And of course, he had never gotten to see what a warm, loving family looked like from the Shin-oh household.

The ironclad rule of that family was competition. His parents... His older sister, Shin HaYoon... And his other relatives—the presence they exuded was completely different from Sumire’s own family.

He always felt like he was treading on thin ice among them. The Shin-oh family did not accept failure and wanted nothing less than perfection. His father, the head of the household, had always said that the tiniest fraction of elites were the ones who ruled over the world.

YuSung had only been four years old when he had been told that. But when he thought about it, he realized just how distanced that philosophy was from everyday life.

‘For example, this place...’

He slowly entered the house.

Sugoro, Sumire’s five-year-old little brother, cocked his head in confusion.

“お兄ちゃんは、... 誰 (Who’s he)?”

Tsuguha, Sumire’s nine-year-old sister, checked the new visit rover, then responded in Korean:

“Idiot! Onee-chan brought over her Korean boyfriend.”

It wasn’t clear whether a child of Sugoro’s age understood what that meant. In his stead, another brother of Sumire’s, twelve-year-old Suito, poked his head out from the second-floor staircase towards the front door.

“えっ?! お姉ちゃんボーイフレンド連れて来た (Ehh?! Onee-chan

brought a boyfriend back home)?!"

Somehow, the situation had turned into a misunderstanding about YuSung and Sumire's relationship. The girl in question quickly waved both of her arms back in forth in denial, her face heating up.

"Eh? N-no! YuSung-ssi is j-just... just... the leader of my party!" she stuttered. "He came over to my house as my party leader, that's it..."

Tsuguha leered in a manner rather unbecoming for a kid of her age. "Aw, sis, you're so cute~"

"Yeah, sis," added Suito, jumping on the bandwagon and also making fun of her in Korean. "You're adorable~"

"Y-you guys!" Sumire, the eldest daughter, scrunched her forehead up rather angrily. "If you keep making fun of your elders, you're gonna get it!"

"Waah~ you're so scary, Big Sis!"

"So scary~"

Seito was giggling, and Tsuguha was snickering. Sumire's attempt at scaring them did not work out one bit.

"YuSung-ssi? I-I'll... show you to my room, then."

And she did so, leading him to her room.

It was quite large, but the furniture inside was rather frugal. Everything was neatly arranged and clean, despite the fact that Sumire hadn't come over in a long while.

*Fidget.*

Sumire placed her arms on her thighs and performed a deep bow towards YuSung.

“Th-the dungeon raid will only be for a short time, but... I’ll be in your care!”

Living in Japan, they say, felt like it went both too fast and too slow. It would be a new experience for YuSung, who had never done anything of that sort before.

He smiled. “I’ll also be in your care, Sumire.”

After exchanging greetings, the two looked each other in the eyes and grinned.

# Chapter 77

Only the two of them were left in her room.

Sumire kept glancing towards YuSung, anticipation filling her eyes.

‘Yu... YuSung-ssi... is in my room!’

She looked like she was going to die of happiness.

Sumire was the type of person who showed everything she felt on her face. But in contrast to her blissful, frolicking-in-flower-fields musings, YuSung’s head was entirely filled with thoughts regarding the dungeon raid.

“Okay. How about we discuss the raid now?”

“Ah, yes!”

Sumire was brought back into reality and sat down in front of YuSung. However, a delighted little laugh would seep out of her mouth whenever she met eyes with the boy across from her.

“Ah, hehe...”

“Sumire, the Castle of Phantasms’ boss monster is the succubus, who leads an army of minions. Of course, there is a lot of undead among them.”

Sumire had the [Call of the Undead] skill, which let her consume a certain amount of her mana to control undead monsters. Against them, she was basically invincible.

Of course, even among those undead monsters, her skill didn’t work against the strong, boss-level ones. This time, however, her opponents were nothing more than minions.



“Which is why the most important thing in this dungeon raid is how we distribute our team members.”

Sumire nodded at YuSung’s explanation. “Th-that means I have to go somewhere where there’s a lot of undead monsters, right?”

“Mhm. The Castle is a pretty large dungeon, though. It’ll be impossible for us to mark the location and number of every single minion on our Pocket map.”

YuSung touched his Pocket, making it display a hologram of the floorplans of the castle. The hologram map had been created by a preliminary raid group.

He pointed towards the entrance with his finger.

“It’s why we need to choose our starting point carefully. Sumire, I want you to enter from the left passage.”

Sumire’s eyes grew wide. “Oh, me? Got it! The left passage is... a v-very useful one that connects to all locations of the castle, including the basement!”

She was a great student who was incredibly proficient in studying. In fact, she had the highest ability for understanding concepts out of anyone in YuSung’s party.

“Yep. Create a skeleton using one of the hairs I give you and use the artifact and your abilities to call forth the undead.”

YuSung pointed at the middle passage marked on the hologram map with his finger.

“Then, we meet up here.”

Sumire, who had been mostly listening quietly to the plan, glanced towards the other boy’s hair.

“Um, YuSung-ssi. S-speaking of...”

“Hm? Is there a problem?”

YuSung cocked his head to one side. Sumire, in response, waved her hands wildly.

“N-no! It’s not really... I-I mean, that’s... I used up all of your hair during our last raid...”

Sumire had used the last of YuSung’s hair that she had received on the boat on the lake dragon. Even so, she had never picked up any of his fallen hairs without his permission because she was scared that he would hate her and call her creepy for it—much like how others had back in middle school. So she was using quite some courage in order to speak up.

YuSung smiled lightly. “Feel free to tell me this whenever. You told me that the effect is greater the longer the hair is, right?”

Saying so, he pulled the ribbon free from his hair. The long locks cascaded down his back, giving off a different look from usual.

Sumire stared blankly, as if mesmerized, and nodded.

“Yes... y-you’re right. I-is it alright if I comb your hair, then?”

Even YuSung’s hair was precious to her. She didn’t want to pull it out by force.

“Mhm, doesn’t matter to me,” he replied.

Sumire went to her drawer and pulled out a comb. “Y-YuSung-ssi! I-if you feel uncomfortable, o-or if it hurts you... tell me, please!”

She reverently sat on her knees behind YuSung and slowly began to comb his hair from top to bottom.

‘I’m combing YuSung-ssi’s hair... ’

Sumire didn’t stop, even when a few brushes had collected more than

enough hair for her. YuSung, who she admired, was at her house, and she was combing his hair with her own two hands. She couldn't stop.

‘This scent. It’s the same shampoo that I use... ’

YuSung used the shampoo that all Seven dormitories were equipped with, so the fact that they used the same shampoo was a given. Even so, Sumire’s lips were twitching in glee.

‘I wish time would stop... ’

She wasn’t just talking about that moment. She wanted YuSung to stay in her house forever, but that would only be possible if he wasn’t a mere party member or comrade of hers but a ‘member of her family’.

“Sumire, this is enough, right?”

YuSung tied his hair up again with his ribbon.

“Ah... yes!” replied Sumire, mumbling with a disappointed expression on her face. “Th-this much is enough. Thank you, YuSung-ssi.”

But at that moment, her gaze turned towards the boy’s hands. His nails came to her attention; they weren’t long, but they still caught her eye.

Sumire bit her lip for a long moment before gathering her courage and speaking up.

“That’s uh... Y-YuSung-ssi?”

‘Hm?’

“C-can I...! Cut your fingernails too?!”

A moment of silence.

Cold sweat began to drip from Sumire’s silent form.

“My fingernails?” he repeated, puzzled.

“Ah, that’s!” Embarrassed, she began laying out a plethora of excuses at her feet. “I-it sounds weird, I know, but... fingernails are more effective for summoning skeletons than hair. I can summon a skeleton ten times with ten fingernails, and... the amount of time they’re summoned for is long, as well...”

“Oh, right, you definitely told me about this before, Sumire. Sure, for the raid.”

Thankfully, YuSung’s reaction was favorable. Sumire let out a sigh of relief, an expression of anticipation on her face.

The boy stretched out his hand.

“I’ll cut them and give them to you.”

Meaning... he was the one cutting his nails.

“Eh?! Uh...”

A desperate situation.

Sumire couldn’t hide her disappointment. But still, only for a moment. She quickly gathered up her courage once again.

“S-still... it’s important that the nails are cut... the same length, for the skeleton’s abilities... W-wouldn’t it be better if I cut them for you... since I’m more used to doing... it?”

YuSung nodded, face sincere. “That’s true. It’s your Skill, after all. It makes sense.”

He stretched out his hand towards her. Sumire’s heart began to beat rapidly.

Right when she was about to grab his hand, someone opened the door to her bedroom.

*Creak.*

*Twitch!*

Sumire quickly hid the nail clippers behind her back when the door opened as if she had been caught doing something wrong.

“Huh? Ts-Tsuguha?”

It was her nine-year-old sister.

“Ta-dah~ Mom says you guys should drink some juice~ you like orange juice, right, sis?”

“Th-thanks.”

Tsuguha handed Sumire the tray. She stared back at her little sister.

“Ts-Tsuguha? You can go now.”

It seemed like she wanted to chase her out of her room as quickly as possible.

“Ehh? But I wanna talk with oppa, too!”

Sumire pushed her sister out of the room, even as she stubbornly tried to stay in it.

“Ah, hahaha... then, YuSung-ssi. This time, for real...”

She grinned, holding the nail clippers in her hands. However, Tsuguha was not the last of the guests entering her bedroom.

*Creak!*

“Oh, my, you haven't drank any of the juice yet? Is it not to your liking?”

Her mother, Suika, opened the door in turn.

Tears welled up in Sumire's eyes. "Uuu... w-we were going to drink the juice later...!"

"Is that so? Fufu. It's just that my husband's come back home, and the preparations for the sukiyaki are finished, as well. Feel free to look forward to it, we bought some quality beef!"

"F-father is..."

Sumire's expression seemed to darken.

Hearing that the food was ready, YuSung stood up, holding the bottle of juice in his hand.

"...Sukiyaki."

"...Eh?"

Sumire stared blankly up at him.

"Let's do this later, Sumire."

"Ah, okay!" She nodded, straining to hide disappointment. "W-we can cut your fingernails any time, after all!... I-I won't forget, okay?!"

She was fixated on doing it right up until the end.

'Sumire's this motivated about the dungeon raid... She really has changed.'

YuSung, clueless about the truth behind her actions, was proud of the positive change that she was undergoing.

\* \* \*

A banquet held for high-ranking officials...

Snow-white tables and chairs, which exuded an aura of luxury at the first glance, were placed all around the hall. In contrast, the dress code was black, the complete opposite.

‘...I hate this place, though.’

The expensive, high-quality formal wear Lee SiWoo had on, despite its value, felt uncomfortable to him. But what bothered him the most was the atmosphere of the party.

There was no special reason as to why those famous, powerful people were spending their precious time attending a banquet. The place had been prepared so that its participants could use their own measuring sticks to compare themselves to each other, solidify connections, and re-establish their positions on the totem pole.

“So this is where you were. Father’s been looking for you for a while, maknae.”

TL/N: Maknae refers to the youngest child of a family, or more generally the youngest member of some sort of group (e.g. a group of businessmen).

The oldest, Lee SiHyuk, placed a hand on his shoulder. SiWoo tried to brush him off with his usual laugh.

“Haha, aw, c’mon, hyung. Just pretend you didn’t see me here.”

*Step step.*

Just as he said that, a man silently walked towards SiWoo—he was the sole person at the banquet to wear white clothing.

“That won’t do.”

The source of the solemn voice was Lee SungHwan.

SiWoo’s eyes narrowed, expression stiff. “...Father.”

“I’ve heard the rumors. They say you’ve managed to place yourself under the party leader who arrested the Rebellion member.”

“Haha... I was just lucky.”

“Everything you’re doing is useless.”

Lee SiHyuk stepped back as his father grimaced.

Lee SungHwan was a man with authority in his house. However, it was an authority that was born from his abilities. He was the chief of the city guard in Korea, which oversaw public order and the safety of the entire country. On top of that, he was the man who led the counterterrorism unit, known for being one of the strongest forces among Korea’s agencies.

“With your current capabilities, you’ll be a third-rate hunter at best, no matter how much effort you put into it. All you’ll be able to do for the rest of your life is become someone for others to step on.”

There was no anger in Lee SungHwan’s voice. He genuinely believed what he was saying.

“But that won’t be the case if you listen to me.” He looked down at SiWoo with emotionless eyes. “Didn’t I tell you? That the talent I created in you is... Tch. You should have just followed in your brother’s footsteps and applied for the city guard.”

The second-eldest daughter, Lee SeonAh, approached him from the side while clicking her tongue.

“You really don’t listen, do you?”

She scanned her little brother from head to toe before letting out a small, sharp laugh.

“I hear that you still bring your little toy bow with you to your extracurriculars?”

SiWoo grinned brightly at her sarcastic tone. “Aw~ what’s wrong with



my bow? I even entered a competition with it, you know?”

“Why, though? Why are you using a bow instead of the guns you’ve been using since you were a kid?”

Lee SeonAh’s question was laced with annoyance.

SiWoo thought about it for some time before opening his mouth.

“It’s because...”

But he cut himself off with a sigh. Smile wiped from his face, he took something out of his Pocket.

*Wshh.*

The blue particles combined to form a rather run-of-the-mill pistol. In fact, the type of gun didn’t matter to SiWoo. There were several dozen different types of guns stored away in SiWoo’s Pocket.

There was a somewhat instinctual reason as to why he refused to use guns.

His emotions cooled.

As SiWoo gripped the pistol in his hand, old memories began to flood back into his head.

Back during his very early childhood...

Lee SiWoo had been forced to use this cold lump of steel... all due to the selfishness of his father.

His Trait, Clairvoyance, may have only been F-rank, but Lee SungHwan knew that it was only rated so low due to the standards of the Hunters’ Association because it lacked lethality or some sort of half-hearted reasoning like that.

The solution the man found was simple: find a way to fill in the gaps

in SiWoo's Trait.

Lee SungHwan said so to his young son with a stern expression on his face:

[...What happens if someone with omnidirectional vision also gains the ability to kill?]

The result of it was guns.

SiWoo began learning how to shoot them when he was seven years old. There was no room in his head for childhood memories, only knowledge about guns.

[Use the backsight and foresight to draw concentric circles.]

[Think of the target as a criminal's head! You need to make them all explode!]

Just as Lee SungHwan had thought, SiWoo's Trait, [Clairvoyance], was the perfect fit for marksmanship.

At nine, he had even used a rifle to shoot a target over a kilometer away.

TL/N: Around 0.6 miles.

SiWoo was a fantastic marksman, even acknowledged by the head of the city guard, Lee SungHwan. He was confident that he could beat anyone, so long as he used the guns that the counterterrorist unit used to subjugate villains or any firearms used for hunting monsters.

Where to aim for a fatal wound... Where to aim if he didn't want his prey to lose mobility... It was all knowledge that SiWoo knew.

But he didn't use guns.

"If I use a gun..."

His voice was subdued, like it belonged to someone completely different.

SiWoo looked at his family with the same emotionless eyes his father had.

“Some real pain-in-the-ass memories start resurfacing.”

SiWoo was no longer smiling, gun in his hand. Even the way he talked was different, almost as if his personality had changed.

“Look closely, noona. You wanted to see my marksmanship? Here, I’ll show you.”

*Bang!!*

SiWoo aimed towards the ceiling and shot.

*Clink! Clang!*

A chandelier fell.

“Kyaaa!”

“A-a gun?!”

The guests were screaming and panicking.

Lee SungHwan creased his forehead, but SiWoo didn’t stop. Instead, he kept shooting, the same emotionless eyes in place.

*Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!*

He shot the rest of his bullets at regular intervals. By the time he finished, all of the chandeliers had fallen from the ceiling.

‘...Annoying.’

His demeanor had completely changed once the gun was in his hand.

SiWoo left the banquet hall and checked his Pocket. The background image was a picture that he had taken with his party members during the picnic they had gone on together.

He blew away the smoke from the muzzle.

‘I knew it.’

It was the first time he had ever felt that much sentimentality, even while wielding a firearm. The pistol in SiWoo’s hand dissolved into particles and vanished into his Pocket.

‘...I should’ve just gone with them to Japan.’



# Chapter 78

A table in a harmonious living room...

Sumire looked rather happy about getting to sit right next to YuSung.

‘I-I’m eating sukiyaki with YuSung-ssi... ’

Sukiyaki wasn’t an ordinary dish to her—it was one she ate on special days with her family.

“Oi, Tsuguha! I told you not to enter people’s rooms without permission!”

“So? Why should I listen to you~?”

Suito glared at his nine-year-old sister, who was acting more carefree than her age suggested.

“おいしい... (Yummy...)”

Five-year-old Sugoro stuck his palm, instead of any food, into the raw egg and lapped it up.

Tsuguha made a face. “Hey! Eat sukiyaki with your egg!”

The mother, Suika, laughed. “Fufu, looks like my dear Sugoro was hungry, wasn’t he? But wait a little longer, won’t you? We haven’t had sukiyaki in a while.”

*Bubble bubble.*

The dish boiled in the pot, a delicious scent wafting in the air.

Someone began walking down the stairs that led up to the second

floor with even, steady steps.

“Oh, my... to think... we’d have such a precious guest over today.”

It was a mild-mannered, middle-aged man with glasses.

“Dad!”

Sumire had a welcoming air about her as she greeted her father with a wave of her hand.

The man, Shintaro, slowly walked towards his daughter and stroked her head.

“Haha, hello. Hey!”

Shintaro sat in the chair facing their guest, YuSung. Even as he wore a friendly smile on his face, he was lost deep in thought.

‘So this is... the leader of Sumire’s party.’

Shintaro had also heard quite a few rumors regarding YuSung. The arrest of the Rebellion member... Winning in the Representative Selections... It was hard for him not to hear about the boy’s exploits.

‘To think he became this strong with a Trait that’s the same rank as Sumire’s... ’

Shintaro had been greatly concerned back when Sumire’s Trait had been first determined to be F-rank. His dear, precious daughter only had an F-rank Trait. He didn’t want to send Sumire out to dangerous situations where her life was at risk while relying on it to save her.

‘...As I thought.’

But Shintaro’s heart became at ease as he saw YuSung’s deeds. Now he not only believed that even F-rank Traits could cut it in this line of work, but also that YuSung would protect her from anything that might pose a threat to her.

‘He’s quite... reliable.’

Shintaro’s gaze was proud as he looked at YuSung.

Of course, that wasn’t all he was thankful about in regards to the boy. Sumire herself had become noticeably brighter after meeting him. Considering the fact that Shintaro had been very concerned for his daughter after ‘that incident’, he felt as if he owed the boy quite a bit.

“Now then, why don’t we begin our meal?” he said, smiling.

Suika covered her mouth and laughed as well. “Now then~ take as much as you’d like, everyone.”

She set the ladle down. As soon as her hand left the handle, however, Sumire took the chance to grab it.

She didn’t do that out of confidence, however. In fact, Sumire had done that because she was knowledgeable about her family’s habits. She had never gotten to eat her fill of meat during a sukiyaki meal before, after all.

Shintaro laughed loudly. “There’s plenty of meat. Why don’t you give our guest as much as he wants?”

Only then did Sumire’s face brighten.

“Th-then! YuSung-ssi... likes meat the most, so... Plenty of that! Then mushrooms... ah, the tofu is really good, too!”

“Hahaha!” Shintaro smiled at the enthusiastic expression on Sumire’s face. “Good thing we prepared a lot of meat.”

Suika was also quite happy about her daughter’s actions. “Oh, my, this child...”

YuSung was focused on the sukiyaki being ladled into his bowl.

‘...It smells great.’



His sense of smell was better developed than most other people due to his life on the mountain.

‘Did they fry the spring onion and tofu before putting it in the pot?’

His palate had been approaching gourmet levels ever since he had met Sumire.

*Munch.*

YuSung picked up a slice of beef with his chopsticks and placed it in his mouth.

‘...This is incredibly delicious.’

Sumire was right. The sukiyaki they ate in the clubroom on a rainy day was delicious as well, but the taste of sukiyaki eaten with others was on a different level.

The girl in question was fretting and glancing towards him.

“H-how is it?” she asked carefully.

“It’s amazing.”

Judging by her expression, his calm reply had blessed Sumire.

“Really? Th-then, eat this, as well!”

Delighted, she used her own chopsticks to pick up a slice of beef, dip it in raw egg, and offer it to YuSung.

*Munch.*

He ate it up without a moment of hesitation. Sumire began giggling dumbly at the sight.

‘I’m feeding... YuSung-ssi... sukiyaki... by hand?’

Anyone could tell she was ecstatic. Shintaro and Suika felt their hearts melt even more.

“Hehe, you look like an idiot, unni.”

“Yeah, noona, you look stupid.”

But Tsuguha and Suito began making fun of her.

“...おいしい (...Yummy)!”

And Sugoro dipped his hand into the raw egg again.

The couple exchanged looks. At Suika’s signal, Shintaro headed towards the kitchen without drawing anyone’s attention.

His wife then followed, an unusually serious expression on her face.

“Dear. As I thought, Sumire...”

“She likes YuSung, doesn’t she?”

“Right? If even a girl normally as passive as her is this obvious...”

Suika cradled her chin and watched her daughter from afar. She couldn’t help the laugh coming out from her lips at Sumire’s delighted expression.

“It can’t be helped. All we can do is cheer her on for as long as they’re here.”

“It seems so.” Shintaro himself also wanted to be supportive of Sumire’s crush. “...Let’s root for her for as long as they’re in Japan.”

\* \* \*

After the meal...

As per the promise they made to each other, Suika and Shintaro both treated YuSung as kindly as one could manage.

[Hoho, you aren't uncomfortable in any way?]

Suika would approach him at the slightest indication that something was wrong.

[...Shin YuSung? Feel free to tell me if anything is bothering you.]

Shintaro would smile amicably.

[Ah, the bathwater has been heated up~ tell me when you're ready to go in, alright? Fufu~]

YuSung entered the bath at Suika's kind insistence.

Sumire's house was quite old, but it was well-maintained. That was due to the influence of Shintaro, who had the frugal lifestyle running through his veins.

‘...A family, huh.’

YuSung smiled slightly.

The luxurious Sevens lifestyle was nice, but the time he had spent in Sumire's house was no less pleasing to him. There was a warm fulfilling nature to the lifestyle with her and her family.

*Shift.*

YuSung finished his bath and stepped out of the tub, and then he took out a white t-shirt from his Pocket.

Now that he thought about it, Sumire had gifted him that particular piece of clothing. Lost in thought, he glanced over the skulls drawn on the fabric and snorted.

‘...Yep.’

YuSung couldn't imagine living a life without his teammates.

*Creak.*

YuSung opened the door leading to the bedroom. There Sumire was, wearing skull-patterned pajamas. She smiled awkwardly.

"A-are you finished?" she said, whispering in a quiet voice in order not to wake Sugoro next to her.

"Mhm, thanks to your mother." YuSung stared down at the thick, cotton quilts laid on the ground. There were three in all: one for him, one for Sumire, and one for Sugoro, it looked like. As soon as he lay down, he could feel the comfortable cotton enveloping him.

As he did so, Sumire turned off the lights. Even with the lack of visibility, she managed to find her spot without any trouble.

Now that they looked back, a lot had happened that day. Sumire stared up at the dark ceiling before opening her mouth to speak.

"Thank you so much... for today." She grinned bashfully, even though the other couldn't see her expression. "It was completely and totally my fault... for abandoning my party and running away to Korea. Still, I was... really happy when you took my side, YuSung-ssi."

YuSung replied to her calmly after listening to her speak. "I couldn't just stand by and watch you get insulted like that, Sumire."

Sumire bowed her head, a flush reddening her face.

"...Since we're in the same party," he added, in his usual inflection.

The addition made her cheerfulness die down, causing her to smile bitterly.

"I thought so... Since we're in the same party, right?"

The truth was, she knew why she felt so bitter about the fact.

YuSung's actions were due to the fact that she was his party member. He would have acted the same whether the one in trouble was EunAh or Amy.

The relationship between Sumire and YuSung was one between fellow party members, and that was that.

‘...I feel weird.’

Even as she felt ecstatic, there was a part of her heart that felt like it was being stabbed.

Some time passed.

Sumire just couldn't go to sleep. 10 minutes. 30 minutes. Just how much more time had she spent looking up at the ceiling?

*Clasp.*

“...Eh?”

YuSung's hand suddenly laid itself on her own. She could clearly feel the texture of his skin.

Sumire was so shocked by the development that her lips began to tremble, but she tried her utmost to calm herself down.

More time passed, and YuSung made no sign to lift his hand. Sumire gulped.

‘Is... is he a-asleep?’

His actions seemed to be a product of his slumber.

Sumire did not make any move to withdraw her hand.

‘I-if I take my hand out suddenly, YuSung-ssi might wake up, and... ’

Even as she was saying that, her fingers were wriggling without her

knowledge.

YuSung's palms were rough and calloused from his training, but his fingers were long and elegant.

Sumire pressed her lips firmly together. It physically hurt to keep the smile threatening to seep out of her mouth.

‘Th-this is YuSung-ssi’s hand... ’

She could feel her heart growing calmer just by holding hands with the boy.

‘I-it feels so goooooood...

And—like magic—Sumire drifted off into slumber.

\* \* \*

“Chirp, chirp chirp!”

A bird could be heard crying from the window.

YuSung lazily opened his eyes. He had slept unusually deeply the past night. His body, his mind, and his overall condition were at their peak.

However, one of his arms felt oddly heavy.

‘It feels like there’s no blood flowing through it... ’

Sensing something was off, YuSung turned his head to look.

And what he was was Sumire, who had boldly drawled into his portion of the bedding. In fact, she had latched tightly onto his arm.

“Su-Sumire?”

He tried to call out to her, but she didn't so much as shift.

He pulled his arm back minutely.

“No!”

And right then, Sumire began to sleeptalk.

*Grab!*

She pulled his arm closer towards her using her entire body, as if declaring she would never let go of him.



“Huhu, this is so nice...”

Then she began to laugh, lips parted wide open. She looked rather satisfied.



YuSung laid back down and closed his eyes.

‘...Can’t help it. I’ll have to sleep another hour.’

That day was the first time he had ever slept in, on record.

# Chapter 79

A refreshing morning...

Sumire rubbed her eyes with the back of her hands and yawned as she slowly woke up. At first, her vision was fuzzy. But as her consciousness resurfaced more and more, she could make out that what she was looking at was YuSung's face.

"...Huh?"

A high-pitched keen bled out of her mouth.

"Uh, uhh..."

Sumire, shocked, quickly let go of YuSung's arm.

"...Oh, you woke up, Sumire."

The boy himself also woke up from her frantic movements. He also yawned, having slept quite soundly—possibly due to the fact that he had let his guard down.

Sumire combed her frizzy hair with her fingers and smiled shyly. "Ah, ha, haha... s-sorry. You must have been uncomfortable."

"No, it's fine." YuSung shook his head. "More importantly... why don't we start preparing for the raid? I know we talked about it before, but the dungeon this time around is rank 5."

He tied up his hair with his ribbon, voice steady as he continued. "It's on a completely different level from the rank 4 dungeons we've challenged up to this point."

Even among members of the Hunters' Association, high-level hunters were the ones raiding rank 5 dungeons. Even so, YuSung and Sumire

were allowed to challenge it despite being students because, as Gaon's representatives, their skills had been acknowledged.

*Nom. Nom.*

Sumire tilted her head in confusion at the odd sound emanating from behind her and turned her head.

“おいしい... (Yummy...)”

Sugoro, despite his small size, loved to eat. At some point during the day, he had already woken up and was crushing a rice cracker, called a senbei, between his teeth.

Sumire deftly picked her brother up and placed him outside of her room.

“H-how about we get started then?!”

She smiled as if nothing had happened. YuSung nodded his head.

\* \* \*

Choten Academy's portal zone...

Sakura stared at the humongous portals laid in a row in amazement.

“I know this is our school and all, but man, we're loaded. Don't you think, Seiji~?”

He didn't answer her question, causing her to smirk. She then spoke again in a manner that didn't directly address her companion but still expected him to listen.

“I can't believe Isshin actually didn't come out here to see us off. He's got an unexpectedly sullen side to him, huh?”

“Haha, even he... has his own issues to deal with, I'm sure.”

“Yeah, true.”

Sakura made a face, bored with Seiji’s answers, and began looking around the area.

An academy with a portal zone was a mark of its having good facilities. Thanks to those portals, students could travel to various dungeons from their own school.

From it, a tradition was born at Choten Academy. Its first-year students were lined up in a row in order to greet Seiji and Sakura.

– 頂点になれ– (Become the top–)!

All of the students began to shout, following the lead of their class presidents.

Seiji strode confidently up to the portal.

*Step step.*

Another set of footsteps could be heard coming from the hallway on the opposite side. Seiji grinned and turned his head towards that direction.

“Over here!”

He energetically waved his hand.

Sakura watched YuSung and Sumire slowly approach them. She began whispering to her team leader as she did so.

“Is he gonna be able to show off the skills that won against Adela?” Her eyes narrowed into slits. “Can we even rely on them in this rank 5 dungeon~? They’re both F-rank, after all.”

Sakura began laughing, much like a fox.

Seiji also laughed. “Doubts will only tear us apart. Since we’re one

party now, the only thing we can do is trust in each other.”

“Heeh~ you really are no fun.”

The four party members had gathered. The head teacher of Choten Academy, Yamada, fiddled with their glasses before giving the group a short explanation in Korean.

“The target location is the rank 5 dungeon, the Castle of Phantasms. Defeat the boss, the succubus, and return safely. I wish you well.”

Vmmm!!

An immense sound began to emanate from the portal as it glowed blue. The newly-formed Korean-Japanese collaboration party stepped in.

\* \* \*

A mysterious structure... The Tower.

The Fist King, Yu WonHak, was the hunter who had managed to reach the highest level of the Tower among all existing mankind. However, the place he was currently at was the first floor— the starting point.

“It’s been a good while.”

He looked up at the Tower, its end beyond sight. It existed and could be seen with eyes, for sure, but the hunters who had scaled the Tower knew that its outside appearance was nothing more than an illusion.

The first floor...

The fifth floor...

The tenth floor...

The twentieth floor...

A new, separate world existed on every floor of the Tower. One could contain a swamp with opaque fog and another could contain a gothic castle.

What every hunter conquering the Tower needed was overwhelming skill that not even the unknown could dampen.

“Kuhaha! To think that the Association president himself would come out and greet me. You have quite the integrity, YuChan-ah!”

Yu WonHak looked at the other man and laughed boisterously, in a good mood.

Kang YuChan nodded with a serious look on his face. “True, true. If you take my integrity away from me, nothing would be left. Huh huh!”

His eyes narrowed. “More importantly, what are you thinking? You, personally, going to the Tower? Don’t tell me you’re going to try and raid it...”

Yu WonHak scratched his head with his thick fingers. “I just came here because it popped up in my head. YuSung is going to start climbing it soon, after all.”

Kang YuChan joined the other man in staring up at the Tower piercing through the heavens.

“Look at you, getting all emotional. How rare. You aren’t about to die on me, are you?”

Yu WonHak, Kang YuChan, the Sword God in China, and the Witch from the United Kingdom—The four had formed a party that had raided the Tower together. These two men who were standing side-by-side were comrades who had gone through life and death together.

“...I was just curious about how far my disciple would go. I taught him everything I knew.”

“Hmm. YuSung... hey, who knows? He might actually conquer the

entire Tower...”

“Kuhaha! That’s music to my ears. He’ll have to conquer the dungeon you gave him first, though.”

Kang YuChan shook his head at the other man’s statement.

“You look like a tiger, but you sure do act like a snake.”

“But... a rank 5 dungeon for an expedition? You’re quite the slavedriver yourself.”

Yu WonHak was correct. The man who had allowed just four students to raid a rank 5 dungeon was none other than Kang YuChan.

“You’re right, I did go a bit too far. Even Association hunters have failed to clear rank 5 dungeons, that’s how advanced they are... it’ll be difficult for students to succeed.”

But Kang YuChan’s experience as the Association president—no, his instincts as a hunter had told him something else.

“But... And I don’t want to acknowledge this... YuSung has the same eyes as you.”

In the Association president’s smirk was his trust towards the other man.

“The sort of gaze that doesn’t know how to give up... that grows stronger in the face of adversity.”

Yu WonHak nodded silently. No matter how infamous rank 5 dungeons were for their difficulty, he was certain that his disciple, YuSung, would succeed.

‘And after the raid, I’m sure you and your comrades will have grown much stronger.’

It was a hurdle that they had to overcome for the International

Competition.

\* \* \*

A gothic castle from the Middle Ages...

Purple clouds swam across the sky, darkened even during the day. True to its name, an eerie, spiritual aura enveloped it and the surrounding area.

Sakura, an archer, supplied mana to her eyes to scan the place.

“Checking done~ no enemies on the outside, just like what the map said.”

Seiji grew pensive, arms crossed, but only for a moment, after which he looked back up at YuSung.

“We’ll enter through the back door then head down the right passageway!” he said confidently.

YuSung nodded in lieu of an answer. It was no easy feat trying to find the boss monster, the succubus, in that large castle. On top of that, the path leading to the succubus’s room had traps and devices in every nook and cranny. Splitting up was the only way.

Sumire stared at YuSung with a serious expression on her face.

“Y-YuSung-ssi. Then I’ll... go through the left passage as we planned?”

“Yep. Keep increasing the number of undead while going through the passage. And... Sumire, contact us with your Pocket immediately if you’re in danger.”

“Yes! I understand!” she answered energetically.

YuSung looked at the right passageway that led from the front door. He placed a hand on the wall.



‘...Something’s off here.’

His sensitive awareness alerted him to that fact. The distinctly thick mana of the Castle of Phantasms was evenly distributed along all locations of the castle, including the inanimate objects.

‘...And a mere rank 5 boss is the one maintaining this entire place?’

YuSung had once heard from the Fist King that the majority of dungeons that had assimilated with the real world showed just how powerful its boss was.

Rank 4. Rank 5. Rank 6. Rank 7...

Bosses appeared in dungeons that were proportional to their strength.

Something about the Castle of Phantasms was weird to YuSung, now that he was looking at it. Even the density of mana that was spread throughout the air was not on the level of a rank 5.

‘The boss monster guarding this dungeon is the succubus, that’s a fact. The Association investigated it themselves... Then how... ’

But no matter how much he thought about it, he couldn’t find an answer to his question. An investigation was in order.

\* \* \*

The first room Sumire had entered had no monsters. Instead, there was a stone tablet with an incomprehensible language written on it that had been placed in the beautiful, well-furnished room.

“...Huh?”

Her right hand began to emit a purple light as if it was reacting to the tablet. Sumire stopped in her tracks to stare at the object.

“Cl... ack?”

There was definitely something weird going on.

The mana spewing forth from the stone tablet looked much too similar to Sumire's Trait.

*Woom- woom!*

"Th-this is? I-It can't be..."

*Step.*

The closer Sumire got to the tablet, the stronger the resonance became between her and the mana emanating from it.

She had heard about something like that before. It was less likely to happen than getting an artifact.

'N-no way... '

But all of the signs were pointing to one conclusion...

"Cl... clack!"

YuSung's skeleton furiously pointed its finger towards the stone tablet as if encouraging her to approach it.

*Woomwoomwoom-!*

The sound emanating from the tablet grew louder.

Her hand was shaking from the mana resonance.

'S-something's weird...

Sumire's power was black magic.

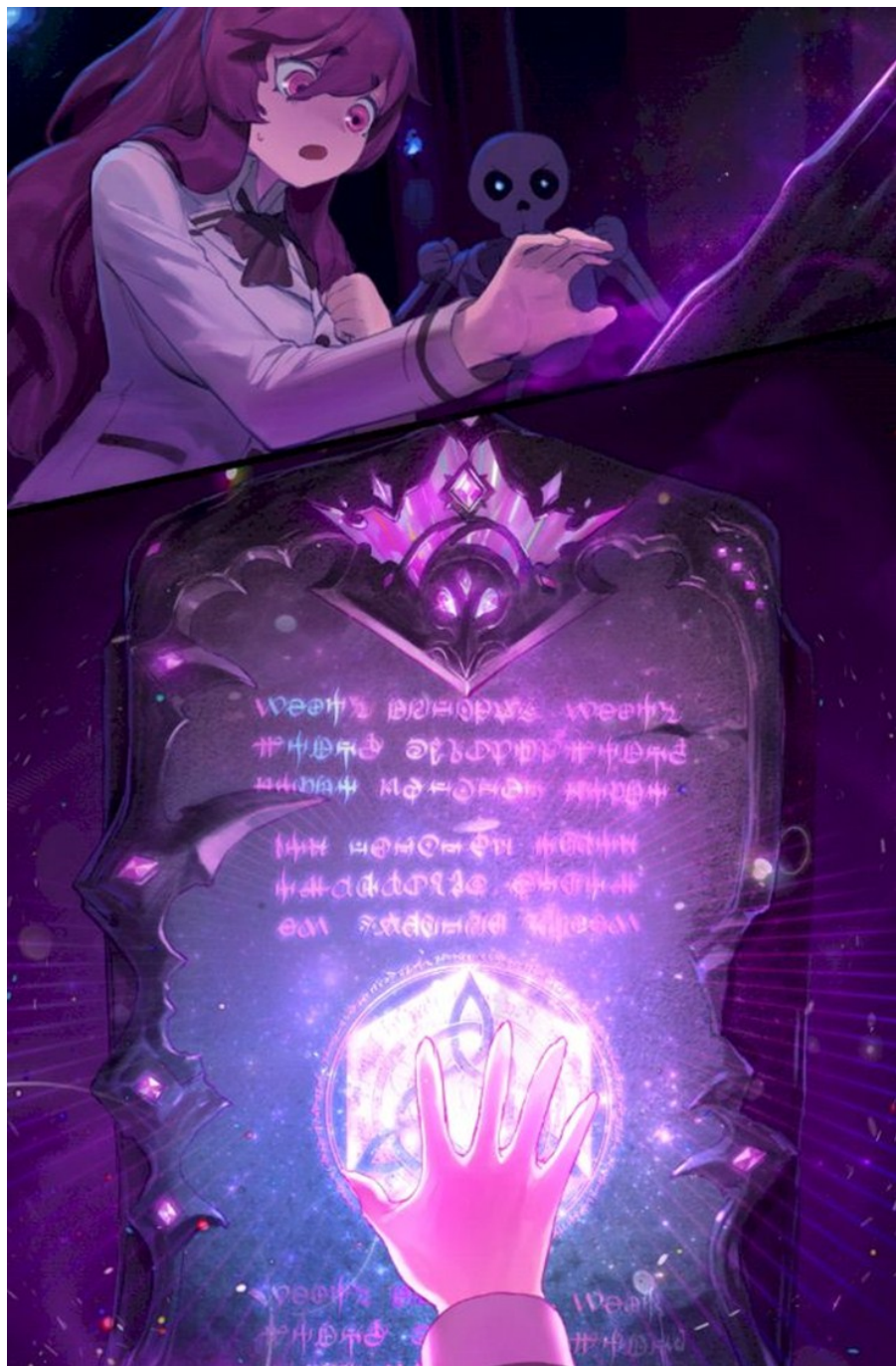
The succubus herself was nothing but a familiar that black magic could summon, meaning the one whose power was emanating from

the stone tablet belonged more in the territory of the witch who had summoned the succubus.

The fact that Sumire's power, which was a different type of magic, was resonating with something inside the Castle of phantasms was weird.

‘B-but... I can't stop!’

However, Sumire looked as if she was in a trance. Her hand drew itself towards the tablet as if it were fate.



Tap.

As soon as she laid her hand upon the stone, everything was revealed.

*Flaaaash!!*

A purple light began to shine from both the tablet and Sumire's hand. She closed her eyes at the assault on her senses, slowly opening them up after a bit of time.

**[Deciphering the language using data stored in the Pocket.]**

**[Deciphering complete.]**

**[The item in question is the (Witch's Fragment–Laplace's Tablet).]**

What she saw in front of her eyes was a hologram from her Pocket.

Nervous, she gulped.

**[The power stored inside the Witch's Fragment is becoming aware of the power of its awakener.]**

**[Calculating assimilation rate...]**

'I... I messed up.'

It was a development she couldn't have ever imagined.

Sumire fiddled with her fingers as cold sweat began to pour down from her body.

# Chapter 80

**[The assimilation rate has been calculated.]**

A notice came up on the hologram. At the same time, pain began manifesting in Sumire's right hand.

*Throb!*

'M-my right hand is hot!'

It was slightly dulled—like the pain you get when you suddenly dip your hand in hot water. Tears sprang to her eyes, but she endured it.

**[The assimilation rate has been calculated referencing the (Wicked Witch) article in the Tower Records.]**

The pain began growing even worse as the explanation went on.

"...Mmph."

But Sumire squeezed her lips tight and powered through it all, keeping a proper eye on the hologram in the meantime.

**[The assimilation rate between the witch Laplace and Hanajima Sumire are as follows:]**

**[1—The information cannot be displayed.]**

Even someone as studious as Sumire couldn't understand what was happening in front of her eyes. The situation was completely outside the realm of possibility.

She bit her lips, eyes filled with worry.

‘S-so there really is something weird going on... ’

The Wicked Witch, Laplace...

She was categorized as a rank 7 boss, on the level of a national disaster, alongside other witches like the Winter Witch Luisa. Seeing traces of someone of her caliber in a rank 5 dungeon was much too out of the ordinary.

## **[2–Basic personality and behaviors]**

The hologram kept displaying information even as Sumire was lost in thought.

**[Your assimilation rate will lower by 22% based on the second category.]**

The assimilation rate dropped.

It meant that Sumire’s personality and her behavior were different from Laplace’s.

## **[3–Ability]**

**[Your assimilation rate will rise by 5% based on the third category.]**

The rate increased since they both used black magic.

Sumire gulped.

‘I heard that you’re compatible if the assimilation rate rises above 50%.’

## **[4–Mana]**

**[Your assimilation rate will rise by 12% based on the fourth category.]**

“S-skeleton-ah! It... it rose!”

“Clack!”

Both Sumire and YuSung’s skeleton were elated. However, the current situation was that the assimilation rate had been cut down more than it had been raised up.

Only one category remained:

**[5–Physique and appearance.]**

The moment of truth.

Sumire tightly grabbed the skeleton’s hands and stared at the hologram screen.

**[Your assimilation rate will rise by 6% based on the fifth category.]**

**[Final assimilation rate 51%]**

**[You have been determined as compatible.]**

**[You have obtained the witch’s first fragment, (Laplace’s Stone Tablet).]**

**[You will absorb the black magic etched into the witch’s fragment based on your assimilation rate.]**

*Drrr–*

The hologram began displaying rows upon rows of letters, emulating a computer trying to execute a program.

*Flash!*

The light shining from the stone tablet was sucked into Sumire’s hand.



“U-urk!”

Sumire didn't know why the remnants of Laplace were there in the first place, but one thing was for sure: she had succeeded in the absorption process. She had managed to obtain the power of the calamitous witch.

“I-I did it! S-skeleton-ah! I really did it!”

Overjoyed, she hugged YuSung's skeleton. It rattled its jawbones in response.

“Clack! Clacklack!”

Sumire had managed to absorb the fragment of a rank 7 boss. It could raise the potential of someone's Trait to an insane degree, even if the said trait was F-rank.

**[The witch's fragment has fused with your Trait, strengthening its abilities.]**

That was only the beginning.

The hologram from Sumire's Pocket shows no signs of stopping.

**[The Trait (Controller of the Undead) has been upgraded to (Witch's Black Magic).]**

**[The Skill (Call of the Undead) has been upgraded to (Witch's Call).]**

**[The Skill (Veil of the Undead) has been upgraded to (Witch's Veil).]**

Sumire's base Trait and all other Skills had been upgraded by absorbing just a fragment of the witch's powers.

YuSung's skeleton, who was standing right next to her, suddenly clenched its fist.

“Clack! Clacklaclack!”

“Y-you feel like you’ve definitely gotten stronger? Huh... I’m still not sure if I have yet...”

“Clack clack!”

“G-got it...! If you insist this much, I’ll believe you!”

Sumire felt happy at its words.

However, the strengthening of her Trait and Skills was nothing more than the advancement of her *own* skills. It was in no way Laplace’s true strength. Even as a fraction of a whole, the fragment belonged to a witch who was labeled a calamitous disaster—her incredible power could only be represented through her Skills.

**[Yuu have obtained (Laplace’s Coffin) as a Skill from the witch’s first fragment.]**

“...Laplace’s Coffin?”

It was a Skill she had obtained not from her Trait, but from the fragment. Due to that, not even the wielder, Sumire, had an idea of what sort of skill it was.

“...Well, whatever it is, I’m sure it made me stronger!”

Sumire stared at her right hand, genuinely happy about what had just passed. She was willing to use any means possible to become stronger if it meant that she could be of help to YuSung. A bright grin stretched across her face.

However, the strange twist of fate that had just come to pass was on a much grander scale than she assumed.

One could search every single hunter to exist from the dawn of hunterkind to the present day and could count the number of people who had obtained a boss’s fragment on one hand. And even if a hunter managed to beat those horrific odds and find a fragment, they would

not even be able to reap its benefits if it didn't sync with them. And on top of that, most fragments that increased one's Trait were located in rank 7 dungeons.

Only some of the very few hunters at the top were the ones who had discovered the existence of those fragments and had obtained their power. That was the first time that a student had ever obtained a boss's fragment.

On top of that, the one Sumire had obtained was from the Wicked Witch Laplace, who was one of the strongest bosses among even her fellow rank 7 bosses.

“O-okay, skeleton-ah, let's keep going!”

Sumire still had no idea how incredible the sleeping potential within her was.

\* \* \*

Japan's team had also split up in two, just like Korea's team.

Sakura was hiding behind a wall, her bow aimed at a particular target.

‘...As expected of a rank 5 dungeon, huh? Even the small fry are too strong.’

The monster at the other end of her arrow looked like a mix between a snake and a lizard. It was called a basilisk, and it was pretty strong even among its fellow rank 4 monsters.

‘I need to kill it in one blow—!’

*Twang!*

As Sakura let go of the string, the power of the wind boosted the speed of the arrow.

*Wshhh!! Stab!*

Her arrow streaked through the air, leaving behind trails of green light until it hit the basilisk squarely in its neck.

“Kieeek!”

Sakura drew her bow once again at the monster writhing on the floor. That time, however, she had not notched an arrow.

“Shh!”

*Wshhh!!*

She used a gathered ball of mana instead and loosed it. Bam! It blew the struggling basilisk into smithereens.

“Easy win~ easy win~”

Bow in hand, Sakura hopped and skipped her way towards the downed monster.

“This place is all cleared up. Now I just have to meet back up with Seiji~”

And right when she was about to turn her head, a carefree smile on her face, she heard a whisper behind her back.

“...And who says you can do that?”

A saccharine voice whose whisper reached all the way down to her soul. Sakura immediately realized that the other was not a human being.

‘Wh-what’s going on? M-my legs... ’

Even though her mind was screaming at herself to run away, her feet refused to lift off from the ground. Paralyzed, like a mouse before a snake.

“You’re completely petrified, hm? Looks like you’ve sensed my

intentions. What a sensitive child...”

“Y-you’re...”

*Shh.*

A hand clothed in a black glove appeared from behind Sakura; the arm connected to it was pale and smooth, like marble.

“...What? Fufu, did you never imagine I’d personally come for you?”

Sakura grimaced and bit her lip at the question. It was true, the thought had never come to her mind. To think that the boss of the dungeon would be there...

“I knew succubi were intelligent, but...”

“How rude, comparing me to those baby nightmares. I’m a succubus with quite a lot of experience under my belt, you know?”

The gloved hand stroked Sakura’s shoulder. The succubus approached her and slowly wound herself around the girl.

“...I was dropped into a weird location, but, at the very least, it’s a simple task for me to cook and eat up you little minnows.”

During the Outbreak, both gates and dungeons had suddenly appeared. In the cases where the monsters were intelligent and friendly towards humans, they could coexist with one another.

The succubus was not one of those monsters—she enjoyed the act of draining the lifeforce of humans and turning them into her minions.

“...And this is why you all should really have put more care into wondering why this castle has multiple entrances.”

“...What’s the reason?”

“The complicated structure of this castle is much like a spiderweb.

And I am... the spider hunting you all.”

As the succubus kept speaking, Sakura tried to spread as much mana as she could throughout her entire body. The reason why she couldn't move was due to the effects of one of the succubus' Skills, [Petrifying Gaze]. Given enough time, it was plenty possible to dispel.

“I am the only free existence in this spiderweb.”

Her body was starting to respond.

Sakura gathered her mana together.

‘My opponent is a rank 5 boss... I need to run away from her, no matter what... ’

She only had one chance.

Sakura quickly spun towards the succubus and shot a ball of air towards her head.

“Haah!”

*Bam!*

The ball of air hit its mark, piercing through the monster's head.

But something was wrong. The image of the succubus, head blown off, dissipated like smoke.

“Is that the end of your struggling?”

The succubus had somehow appeared on top of the basilisk, sitting on its corpse. She laughed in an easygoing manner.

*Rub. Lick.*

She dipped her ring finger into the basilisk's blood and tasted it with her tongue.

“Delicious... I understand why vampires are so crazy about this stuff. Should I feed you to them, as well? They can't hold themselves back when human blood is on the line, you see...”

Sakura's body shook like a leaf at the terrifying sight.

‘W-we can't win against this thing... a rank 5 dungeon really was too much, after all... ’

The more Sakura's terror grew, the stronger the effects of the mana emanating from the succubus became.

*Crack. Rip!*

A pair of wings sprouted out from her back.

The succubus looked at Sakura, who was scared stiff. The milky whites of her eyes had bled away.

“Do you know now why... I chose you as my first prey?”

The monster looked like something out of Sakura's nightmares. She shook her head left and right, tears flowing down her face.

“I-I don't know! I don't know... anything like that!”

Sakura's consciousness was slowly shutting down from the magic energy that was emanating from the succubus.

“It's because... you were the weakest one,” she continued, voice like silk. “No matter how tough you act, it's useless. Your true nature will never change...”

Saying that, the succubus stroked Sakura's head. Sakura slowly lowered her hands, giving up on resisting the monster's enchanting voice.

The succubus smirked, secure in her victory.

‘The preparations are complete.’

There was a reason why she had persistently attacked Sakura mentally. That reason being that she had a Skill she could only use when her opponent’s mental walls had been completely lowered.

She placed her lips on Sakura’s own.

*Shhhh!*

Using [Enchanting Kiss], she poured pink-colored mana into the girl. The light in Sakura’s eyes slowly dimmed.





“Who are you?”

“...”

Even when asked a question, Sakura didn't respond. Under the succubus' enchantment, Sakura was no different than a puppet without her own will.

"You're going to help me... and kill all of the intruders, okay?" she whispered.

Sakura nodded, eyes blank. "...Yes."

The succubus smiled, satisfied.

"Kuhuhu! I can already envision the looks of surprise on their faces!"

Their opponent was a rank 5 boss with intelligence. Even with the collaboration between Korea and Japan, she was not an opponent to be underestimated.

# Chapter 81

Boooooom!

As the golem collapsed, a gust of wind formed as it hit the ground and tossed YuSung's hair into the air.

‘...So the gatekeeper was a rank 4 boss monster.’

He was clearing the dungeon at record speeds. While every other member of the party was still working on clearing their first rooms, YuSung had already demolished his third one.

He stared at the golem and thought, rather insensitively:

‘This dungeon might be too much for the current Sumire.’

He had yet to know that the girl had obtained the witch's fragment.

*Rumbbbble!!*

The wall slid open after the monster was defeated, letting YuSung continue on.

The passageway wasn't very long. One could see the button placed at the end of the hall from its entrance.

‘Will the next location open up if I press it?’

It was more of a complicated setup than he'd thought it would be.

The Castle of Phantasms was built like a maze. However, YuSung had easily seen through all of the traps that had appeared in front of him without any trouble. Of course, his keen gaze hadn't missed that one, either.

‘...Where’s something I can throw?’

YuSung picked up a piece of broken-off brick that he found on the ground and took a stance.

*Whoosh!*

He threw it at the button.

*Thunk!*

His shot was a bullseye.

*Rmmmm!*

The passageway rumbled open, then immediately closed itself back up again. If he had pressed the button with his hand, he would have been trapped in there.

YuSung, however, already had experience with various types of traps that the Fist King had set up back on Martial Spirits’ Mountain.

‘Well... I disabled all of the traps. Time to head back, I guess.’

YuSung turned back around to face the way he had come through. As it so happened, he could feel a rumble in the distance. A new passageway had definitely opened.

\* \* \*

That was the first time that someone had attempted to overwhelm the Castle of Phantasms with numbers. The undead filling its corridors had already become Sumire’s underlings due to her [Witch’s Veil] Skill.

And the ones in charge of leading them were YuSung’s skeleton and the death knight.

“C-clack!”

“Des... troy! Master’s... enemies!”

*Stompstompstomp!*

The undead mob rushed the golem, footfalls creating a great racket. The enemy was being chipped down bit by bit.

“If your... blade breaks hit... it with your head! If your... head breaks! Bite it with... your teeth!”

The skeletons cheered at the death knight’s war cry, rattling their jawbones together.

“Clacklack!”

“Clack, clack!”

The golem, a being created using advanced technology, had its mana core embedded in its head. At the moment, it was emitting a red light.

*Vmmm!*

“Destroy... The... Intruders!”

*Zzzzzzzt!!*

Lasers shot from its eyes, sweeping across the ground.

*Pabababat!*

Any undead hit by the attack instantly melted under the golem’s gaze.

However, its ultimate move was useless.

“D... descend upon this place, army of darkness.”

Sumire, an actual necromancer, was using her ring in the corner of the room to constantly summon more undead. She was a veritable undead

factory, considering the large amount of mana she still had left in her reserves.

“Clacklack!”

“Gohhhh...”

A magic circle appeared in front of Sumire, summoning skeletons and ghouls. She lifted her ring up into the air and began to chant, a purple-tinged aura emanating from her body.

“D-darkness... conceal the sun!”

Of course, there was no sun in the sky there, as they were inside the castle’s interior. The black clouds spewing out from the ring, however, still did their job and strengthened the undead.

*Wshhh!*

“Guohhhhhh!!”

“Power is... gushing out... from my bones! This is the... blessing of our... master!”

“Clack!”

The undead enthusiastically cheered, drunk on Sumire’s power.

However, that wasn’t the end of it.

A pair of red eyes suddenly appeared in the mass of black clouds, then it began moving along the ceiling as if it had a life of its own.

‘Is... is this because of the power I got earlier?’

Sumrie watched the cloud move in wonder. The power she had obtained from the witch’s fragment had strengthened her Fog of Despair.

*Whoosh!*

The black cloud flew around, following its master, Sumire. Normally, the Fog of Despair would dissipate rather quickly, giving it a short activation time. However, that weak point seemed to have been completely taken care of.

“E-everyone, attack!”

Sumire pointed towards the golem. The undead, in tandem, went on the offensive.

“Grrr... blaaargh!”

The ghouls, who earlier could only attack by scratching the opponent with their nails, began vomiting up their stomach acids to melt the golem. The death knight’s greatsword had also changed—black mana was overflowing from it.

“Kuhaha! The current... me isn’t even afraid... of the Dullahan! Cry, out! Deathbringer!”

As it swung its weapon, black fire enveloped the golem.

Sumire had definitely gotten stronger after obtaining the artifact and absorbing the witch’s fragment. If one only took necromancers into consideration, she would be far and away the strongest one.

“Guohh!”

“Kill... it!”

YuSung’s skeleton jumped towards the golem’s head as the ghouls and the death knight did their thing.

*Boing!*

It flew high up in the air.

The golem once again gathered red light in its core.

“Destroy. Intruders!”

But YuSung’s skeleton, whose power was enhanced further by the witch’s fragment, was powerful.

*Bam! Crack!!*

A simple, bony punch was all it took to produce a crack in the golem’s core.

The death knight ended up dealing the final blow.

*Wsh! Crack!!*

The golem stopped moving entirely as its core was completely broken.

“W-we won! We did it, everyone!”

Sumire was overjoyed, expression bright. Seeing their master in high spirits, the undead also cheered.

“It’s... our victory!”

“Clacklack!”

“Grrr!”

Those monsters may have looked terrifying to the point that one could fear them appearing in their nightmares, but they were completely whipped for Sumire, their master, like no other.

“Hoo... ray!”

“Clack!”

“Grr, grrr!”



Continuing their self-congratulations, the group of undead lifted Sumire up above them using their arms.

“K-kyah?! You guys... waaah!”

Then they threw her up into the air.



\* \* \*

“Cl... ack!”

“Grr!”

“Y-you guys...”

She was stifled, touched by the passionate display of affection she was receiving from them. She had never experienced anything like that before. It seemed like the small fry undead were starting to resemble their master in personality, little by little.

“Mas... ter! The passage has opened!”

“Grr, grrr!”

“Mas... ter! Please let me, a ghoul... scope the passage... out first!”

*Nod.*

“I-I understand. Then... be careful!”

The ghoul made its way into the passageway after getting her permission.

“Grr! Grrr!”

*Tap.*

However, as soon as it touched a brick that was jutting out of the wall, a trap activated, sending a torrent of arrows into the air.

*Wooooosh! Stabstabstab!*

“Guhhhhh! Kgk.”

The ghoul became immobile, body turned into a veritable honeycomb by the sheer number of arrows in it.

Sumire made a little gasping noise with her mouth.

“Is... is...” she asked, carefully, “Does anyone else want to volunteer next?”

The undead army Sumire commanded could be revived whenever as long as she still had mana. The volunteers could step up without any fear.

“Mas... ter! Please give me the opportunity!”

“Clackclack!”

“Grr grrr!”

If YuSung had destroyed the traps he'd come across using his finely-honed skills and experience, Sumire did so using numbers. The undead could not die and therefore were not scared of the traps.

*Rumble!*

After she pressed the button, the passageway opened with a tremor. Sumire, who had obtained the power of the witch, had accomplished a major feat.

‘I really cleared it!’

Sumire wanted to be stronger than anyone else in her party.

So that she could remain in YuSung's party...

So that she could be of help to YuSung...

The witch's fragment was a newfound power that had managed to find its way to such a person.

‘It... it was called Laplace's Coffin, right?’

But there was a strange sense of foreboding towards her newly-obtained Skill. It almost felt like her subconsciousness was warning her, telling her it was dangerous.

But that wasn't important to Sumire at the moment. What *was* more important was to meet back up with her party leader, YuSung.

‘...Let's go back to YuSung-ssi!’

\* \* \*

[★Korea-Japan Expedition Chatting Room☆]

[すみれ: (\*●□↓□●)ノ I have finished clearing this end!]

## what the hell is this symbol, i have never seen it before in my life

[Shin YuSung: Nice work, Sumire. Head back to the entrance for now. We'll all meet up and go through the new passageway together.

[すみれ: !!! ]

[すみれ: △/ ✿□.□\>]

[Only!No.1!: Sakura? How about your end?]

Ten seconds passed after Seiji sent his message. There was still no reply from Sakura.

An ominous feeling settled over the group. Seiji sent another message.

[Only!No.1!: Sakura?]

Again, nothing but silence in the chatroom.

*Ring!*

[Sakura✿: Yeah]

—A belated response from Sakura.

Seiji let out a sigh of relief and resumed typing.

**[Only!No.1!: Where are you right now?]**

**[Sakura❀: I've been waiting here this entire time.]**

**[Sakura❀: Come here and get me Seiji, quickly.]**

Seiji creased his forehead. He couldn't point out exactly what, but there was something odd with Sakura's messages.

'...Maybe it's because we're chatting over text?'

Her manner of speech was different from the usual. And it was rather odd that she had asked him to pick her up.

'Is she hurt?'

Uncertain, he kept on chatting with her.

**[Only!No.1!: Did you get hurt anywhere?]**

**[Sakura❀: Mhm. Exactly. So hurry and come here.]**

Even as he realized something was off, Seiji decided to head into the passageway Sakura had entered and began running.

\* \* \*

*Tap. Taptaptap.*

Sakura typed a message into her Pocket with blank eyes.

**[Sakura❀: Mhm. Exactly. So hurry and come here.]**

She pressed the 'send' button. Almost right after, Seiji's response appeared.

**[Only!No.1!: Okay. I'll be there ASAP.]**

“He says he’s coming,” she said, voice listless.

The succubus gently stroked Sakura’s head, the girl sitting on her lap.

“Nice work. What a good child you are.”

She smiled in a creepy manner, both corners of her mouth jutting up.

“...You know what you have to do for me, yes?”

Sakura responded without a second of hesitation to her question.

“I need... to kill the intruders.”

The succubus smiled widely as she stared at her as if satisfied. She brought the girl into an embrace.

“So good... so good. Show me your loyalty from now on, then. With your own hands, you have to...”

She leaned into Sakura’s ear and began to whisper in a honeyed tone.

“Kill your friends. I’ll give you a reward if you succeed. Something very good... fufu, you know what I mean, right?”

Sakura did nothing but nod at the succubus’s words with a dazed expression on her face.

“...Yes.”

Without the Korean team knowing...

The Japanese team was on the brink of annihilation.

# Chapter 82

*Step, step.*

Seiji had arrived at the location Sakura had called him to, but he couldn't see her anywhere, let alone help her with her injuries.

“Sakura? Where are you?”

He spun his head, checking his surroundings.

*Woosh!!*

Right then, an arrow flew through the air, aiming for his head

“Urk!!”

*Wsh!*

Seiji quickly ducked, dodging the projectile. The arrow had only just barely skimmed the top of his skull—what would have happened if he hadn't dodged was obvious.

He looked in the direction the arrow had come from. He saw Sakura, face expressionless.

“You're... S-Sakura?”

Seiji's voice shook at the unexpected development. Sakura herself, however, wasn't concerned with what had just passed. She notched another arrow into her bow.

*Twaaang!!*

The arrow pierced through the air at incredible speed, boosted by the



power of wind.

Sakura stared at the arrow.

“Scatter,” she murmured, voice small.

It began to glow with a green light, then split into several dozen projectiles. It was impossible to simply swat all of them out of the way.

However, her opponent was the winner of the Representative Selections, Seiji.

“Sakura! Why?!”

Seiji cried out a question, stomping the ground with his foot at the same time. A wall of shadows burst from the floor.

*Rrrumble!*

Countless wind arrows lodged themselves into the shadow wall.

Sakura kept repeating the same words over and over again like an emotionless doll.

“I will kill... the intruders. I need to kill you... for the sake of my master. No matter what, with my own two hands...”

She gathered mana into her hand.

*Woosh!!*

A storm began to gather around her. Sakura’s cherry blossom-colored hair whipped around beautifully in the wind, her school uniform flapping violently around her.

“Zephyros.”

Only when she mumbled that did Seiji finally realize what was going

on.

‘She’s definitely... being controlled! Is it hypnosis? Or maybe she’s under an illusion?!’

Zephyros was a Skill with the highest amount of lethality among all of Sakura’s Skills. She always called it her last resort and kept it close to her chest, so she never used Zephyros unless her life was in danger.

But the current Sakura was using this Skill on Seiji.

*Howl! Wooooosh!!*

The deadly storm brewed with her at the center. The winds shredded every object in her surroundings like a blender. The soundwaves emitted by the wind were strong enough to make one’s head spin.

Seiji cocooned himself within his own shadows.

‘If I also fall... ’

He clenched his fist. His party member, Sakura, was being controlled. If he was also taken down, the chances to finish the raid would exponentially decrease. In the worst-case scenario, neither Seiji nor Sakura’s safety would be guaranteed.

**[Only!No.1!: help]**

He frantically sent a message using his Pocket, its contents nothing more than a short cry for help. He couldn’t write anything more extensive due to the winds of Zephyros trying to break through.

*Whooooosh!!*

Seiji’s shadows were slowly being torn apart by Sakura’s winds.

‘A-at this rate... ’

He bit his lips and endured the assault. His body pushed back in

reaction to the immense amount of mana he was drawing out of it, but it wasn't like he could just relax.

*Wshh!*

Sakura's storm gradually began to die down, then stopped.

"...That was really dangerous, Sakura."

Seiji stepped out from his shadows, exhausted and trying to catch his breath.

In lieu of a response, Sakura aimed her bow at him.

*Twang!*

Her arrows boasted a speed that couldn't be followed with the naked eye, all due to the power of wind infused into her attacks.

However, Seiji managed to catch one of those arrows with his shadows.

"Take a break for a moment."

He stretched his hand out. As he did so, shadows flew from the ground and restrained Sakura's arms and legs.

"Rgh! Khhhh! Let go of me!"

The girl began resisting violently, even baring her teeth in desperation. As Seiji thought, she was very different from her usual self.

'...Is this the succubus' little trick?'

He worried for his party member, even after being in a position where he had been attacked by her.

'What can I do to get Sakura back to normal?'

The girl in question was snapping at the shadows restraining her like a wild dog.

Seiji began feeling guilty as he watched her struggle helplessly against her binds.

‘Was a rank 5 dungeon... just too much for us?’

Now that things had come to that point, however, all they could do to escape this situation was to kill the succubus. Knowing this, Seiji rekindled his determination—acting as someone befitting of the passionate personality he had.

‘I’m sure a path to a solution will open when the Korean team gets here!’

But their opponent was a rank 5 boss with intelligence. She did not sit back and wait for Seiji’s plan to come to fruition.

“...Tie her up? Fufu, how complacent.”

*Whoosh—!*

The boss monster appeared behind Seiji and swung her scythe at him.

If the boy had released Sakura, he could have recalled his shadows back to him. However, he hadn’t done so. The indolent choice he made had cost him his victory.

*Sliiiiice!*

Blood erupted from Seiji’s back like a fountain.

“Keuk—!”

He belatedly backed off from the succubus.

Sakura had also been freed from her binds in the process. It was a dire situation.

“...So you can’t hurt your comrades, no matter what?”

The succubus laughed, delighted, as she watched Seiji bleed.

“How foolish. Fufufu! Don’t worry. You’ll turn into an adorable doll, just like that girl...”

She spun the scythe in her hand once. As she did so, it transformed into a whip. She then swung the whip at Seiji, an easygoing smile on her lips.

“Very soon!”

*Crack!*

The whip’s target was Seiji’s wrist. Her aim was to restrict his movement using her weapon. As soon as she succeeded, Sakura’s arrows would do the rest of the work.

*Squeeze!*

“Keuk!”

It landed exactly where she’d aimed. Seiji felt like his hand was going to snap off from the pressure.

The real problem was what happened next, however. The boss monster began using Mana Drain through her whip, and his mana flowed through the whip into the succubus.

She bit her lip as a blissful expression crept up onto her face.

“Ah, haaa... I can feel it, your mana... Huhu, I see. I understand. So you’re the sort of child who is... virtuous... and honest, hmm?”

A pair of wings grew from her waist, showing that she was in peak condition.

On the other hand, Seiji was in his worst condition now that his mana had been drained.

“...Sakura!”

No matter how many times he called her name, Sakura stared at him with an emotionless expression on her face.

The succubus slowly alternated her gaze between the two children.

“Controlling her was so easy. Those who act tough on the outside are the ones who are the most fragile on the inside. Even the tiniest shake will... fufu, you understand, yes?”

“...None of my party members are weak,” Seiji mumbled. Even in that despairing situation, there was a glint of light shining in his irises.

He stared at the boss monster, eyes wide open.

“Even if we’re shaken,” he shouted, “and even if we fall down, we stand back up again until the end! That’s the resolution we, as hunters, hold in our hearts!”

“Don’t worry about that,” she replied, coldly mocking the boy’s words. “There is no need to put so much effort into shouting these things out loud anymore. I will easily, effortlessly... taint your virtuous personality.”

With a signal from the succubus’ pointer finger, Sakura notched another arrow into the string of her bow.

Seiji’s arm was tied up and his mana had been stolen—not even he could dodge the attack in that situation.

*Twaang!!*

The projectile, overflowing with the power of wind, flew until it reached right up to his nose.

A single moment before death...

Right then, a black flash of light shot forward from the entranceway of the room and swallowed the arrow up.

“You are...!”

The succubus creased her dainty forehead and glared at her new opponent.

At the end of her stare was YuSung, wearing the Black Dragon’s Hide. Black-colored mana was pouring out from him.

“Shin YuSung!” Seiji yelled desperately, “Sakura’s being controlled right now!”

“That doesn’t matter.”

*Ssst!*

YuSung pumped black-tinged aura in every direction from his body before disappearing in an instant.

*Tap!*

In the next instant, he appeared behind the succubus.

*Boom!*

With a dull thud, the boss monster was blown back.

“Kyaah!” she screamed, her body making an impact with the wall. ”M-my pawn! Hurry! Shoot an arrow! Hurry!”

Sakura, eyes dull, tried to adjust her aim towards YuSung, but right when she was about to, Seiji stood in front of her.

“Stop it! Sakura!”

He grabbed her right hand. In response, the girl growled, baring her teeth.

“Let go!!”

But he kept holding onto her hand.

The thought of not being able to follow the succubus’ orders made Sakura scream.

“Let gooooo!!”

She howled like a lunatic, grabbing an arrow with her left hand and swinging it towards Seiji, but the boy grabbed it mid-swing with his bare hands.

*Driiip.*

Blood poured from his hand, and he was feeling woozy from the lack of mana in his body, but Seiji remained steadfast.

“I won’t, Sakura! No matter what you do, I’ll never let you go!”

Hearing that, Sakura stopped struggling ever so briefly.

Seeing her reaction, Seiji grinned, carefree.





“Even if you forget who I am. Even if you attack me. Even if you betray me. You and Isshin will always be my fellow party members.”

Sakura remained frozen as Seiji continued to talk. Perhaps the girl

might have been fighting the succubus' mind control the entire time.

“L-let go of me... I...”

“Nope, I’ve already decided to stay with you guys. Together we’ll blow past Japan and become the top of the world.”

He laughed like an idiot at the declaration, only continuing to speak after he properly locked his eyes with the girl in front of him.

“So that’s why I won’t let go of this hand, no matter what happens.”

Sakura had completely stopped moving at his words.

YuSung took that opportunity to finish the succubus off one and for all.

*Ssst!*

“...This is the end.”

The black aura that had been restlessly stirring inside YuSung’s body gathered into his hand. With one, concise movement, YuSung stretched his palm out.

### **Battle God Style - Black Dragon's Boulder Crushing Palm**

There was a moment of deep silence as the energy of the black dragon consumed everything in its vicinity, even sound.

*Boooooom!!*

The explosion of sound that appeared right after rang throughout the Castle of Phantasms.

# Chapter 83

## Battle God Style - Black Dragon's Boulder Crushing Palm

The mind-boggling destructive power of the technique left the succubus in tatters. Eyes dyed red, she glared murderously at YuSung.

“C-cough! H-how dare you! Kak! Keuk... dammit!”

Her combat power was much lower compared to her fellow rank 5 boss monsters. The reason she was dangerous was because of her intelligence coupled with her Skills that sowed confusion amongst her enemies.

The match had been decided the moment that the Black Dragon's Boulder Crushing Palm had hit her directly. Even so, a corner of her lips quirked up into a smile.

“Kuhuhu, my, oh my... is it really alright for you to kill me? Hm?”

The succubus looked up at YuSung and laughed before pointing at Sakura with a single finger.

“Even if you kill me... the bewitchment on her won't wear off. That child... will definitely break.”

Seiji hurriedly tried to stop YuSung at those words.

“H-hold on! Wh-what are you...”

But YuSung didn't lower his fist. In fact, a black aura began spouting from the Black Dragon's Hide as he glared down at the succubus with cold eyes.

“Threatening me won't work.”

“Fufu, this isn’t a threat, just the truth. She’ll turn into a corpse-like doll...”

Her eyes were blown open wide and glowing red as she glared the boy down.

“I bet she would rather die than stay like that.”

The situation was tauter than a tightrope.

But right then, Sumire belatedly arrived at the scene, panting all the while.

“Y-YuSung-ssi! I-I’m also here... gasp, gasp... y-you’re too fast. I-I ran here so desperately th-that my stomach is hurting...”

Sumire’s physical capabilities, despite being a hunter, were close to zero. There was no chance of her matching YuSung’s speed. Even getting there at that moment in time was something to be grateful for.

The succubus stared at Sumire, who was catching her breath, with a dumbfounded expression on her face.

“...L-Laplace-nim?” she muttered.

An odd atmosphere rose up between the two. Sumire, not knowing anything about what was going on, scanned the area while taking stock of the situation.

The succubus slowly approached the girl with wobbling steps. “N-no... you seem similar, but something’s different! Your mana feels similar to Laplace-nim’s, but it’s severely lacking compared to hers!”

She examined Sumire thoroughly, starting from her face and going down to her legs. Her eyes narrowed.

“You also... look somewhat similar to her, but...”

Her gaze stopped at Sumire’s hairband.

“There is no way... that Laplace-nim would wear such an unfashionable hairband!”

“Un-unfashionable...”

Sumire quailed under the inspection, fondling her hairband. Seeing that, the succubus’s voice grew even louder.

“And your expression! Laplace-nim would never make such an idiotic face like that!”

She suddenly began hurling insults at the girl. Sumire, shocked, turned towards YuSung. Her lips were wobbling.

“U, uu... Y-YuSung-ssi... she’s wrong, right? I-I! I’m not... am I unfashionable?!”

“Don’t go near her.”

YuSung moved next to Sumire in order to protect her.

‘Did she just say... Laplace-nim?’

Even while Sakura was being held hostage, he was calmly dissecting the succubus’s words.

The Wicked Witch, Laplace...

He had definitely heard that name from the Fist King before.

‘Just what sort of connection does the succubus have... with the rank 7 boss Laplace?’

YuSung tried to find a way to connect the succubus and Laplace using the information given to him. First off, the mana imbued in the objects all over the castle was oddly dense.

‘But that all makes sense... if Laplace is connected to this place.’

If the castle or objects were used by Laplace, there was nothing odd about the mana levels within them.

Another thing was that the succubus and Laplace seemed to have a close relationship.

‘If the succubus isn’t a regular boss monster but... Laplace’s minion... ’

Laplace was known for having an army full of undead and monsters as minions. It was a plausible possibility.

That train of thought naturally led to a reason as to why the succubus’s tactics were so advanced.

‘She must have gained a lot of experience while fighting alongside Laplace, after all.

While YuSung was deep into his deductions, a bright, purple light was beginning to seep out of Sumire’s right hand.

“H-huh?”

The succubus’s own right hand reacted in response. The same purple light could be seen seeping through the glove on her hand.

“Th-this power is definitely... Laplace-nim’s... J-just who are you, anyways?!”

Her gaze flew up towards Sumire, flabbergasted.

Sumire, too, was similarly thrown off.

‘...I-I don’t know, either.’

Cold sweat dripped down the girl’s face as she found herself unable to mutter a single word.

It was then that YuSung noticed a way for Sumire to save Sakura.

“Sumire, can you make the succubus your minion?”

“I... I can't do that, she isn't a familiar that I summoned...”

Even if it was a rare request from YuSung, it was something beyond her ability. Of course, Sumire had received Laplace's power from the fragment, but that power was sealed under the new Skill she had obtained.

‘It might be possible if I succeed at using the new Skill... ’

While Sumire was pondering over that possibility, the succubus had shifted to sitting on her knees, staring up at the other girl with mournful eyes.

“If you really are connected to Laplace-nim... you know what my name, my true name is, right?”

A minion's true name...

There was no possibility of someone who wasn't the contractor themselves knowing it, and that included Sumire, but her right hand continued to resonate with the succubus's own hand.

“Sumire! Please!”

Seiji shouted from afar, holding Sakura in his hands.

Sumire was the only one who could possibly salvage the situation. She bit her lip.

‘Laplace's Crown... ’

She felt an odd amount of trepidation from her newly-acquired Skill to the point where she suspected it was a warning. Laplace was a witch, no matter the fact that she was sealed in a fragment. There was no telling what could happen.

But Sumire stretched out her hand.

The reason she'd come to Japan was so that she could change from her previous self, who had done nothing but run away from trouble. And this time, YuSung was with her.

“D-deliver unto me... th-the Crown of wickedness.”

Sumire muttered the chant as if under a spell.

The world froze, colors washed out to black and white. A black sphere began to form where Sumire's hand was outstretched.

*Kk, kkkk!*

The sphere grew bigger, swallowing everything up in its path.

And in the dark void, a flicker of light appeared, growing brighter and brighter.

‘Th-this place is... ’

A dilapidated throne room was laid out before Sumire's eyes. The inside of the castle was adorned with ripped flags and broken stained-glass windows. The pitch-black sky served to complete the dismal atmosphere.

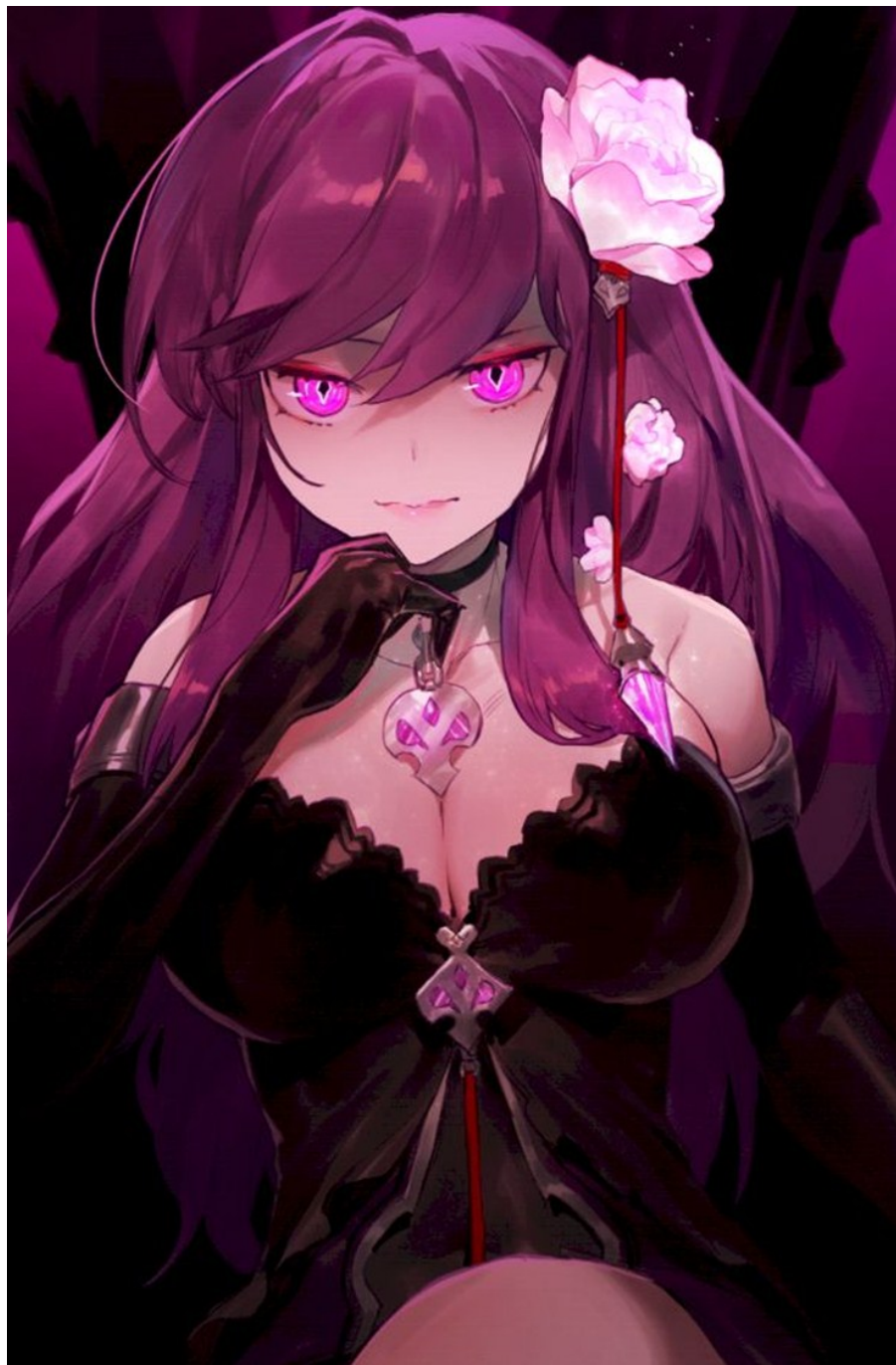
*Fwoosh!*

The ominous, purple-tinged fog cleared, revealing the throne. The aloof beauty sitting upon it was muttering to herself.

—... A guest, here? Now I've seen everything.

The purple-haired woman turned her gaze towards Sumire and smiled.





\* \* \*

“A-are you... the Wicked Witch, Laplace?”

The woman leaned her chin on her hand and nodded.

– My original form has been known to be called that.

Sumire took some time debating whether to open her mouth or not a food a good while until finally gathering up the courage to do so.

“P-please! lend me your strength!”

–... By that, you mean you desire my crown?

Laplace’s voice rang menacingly in Sumire’s head. The woman herself had a faint smile on her face.

Sumire’s body felt like it had frozen in place. Even still, she forced herself through her nervousness in order to move her body.

*Nod nod.*

Sumire stiffly gave her assent, her body trembling all over from nerves. Laplace’s smile grew bigger.

–... Very well. Though, fufufu, there’s no need to be so afraid of me.

Her attitude towards Sumire was surprisingly favorable. Perhaps the long time she had spent sealed away made the encounter a source of amusement for her.

– I am the manifestation of Laplace’s own thoughts sealed into the fragment. I won’t be able to do any harm to you.

*Raise.*

Laplace lifted her index finger, and purple mana began to gather in the air.

*Woosh!*

It eventually coalesced into the shape of a thorned headpiece—it was

the crown that Laplace's power was sealed in.

The witch looked down at Sumire from her throne, face expressionless.

–... Since I'm not the real Laplace, I can give you this crown.

*Tap tap.*

Her fingers tapped against the armrest as she continued.

– In exchange, collect all of my fragments. You can do that much, yes?

Sumire carefully spoke up. “B-by the fragments, you mean... stone tablets?”

– No, all of the fragments imbued with my power are in different forms. But you, you can differentiate them. You are similar to me in some ways, are you not?

Sumire laughed bashfully at the statement. How could someone as timid as her be similar to Laplace, who looked like a queen?

The witch, in response, began to complain.

– See this! This place may just be a construct for Laplace's thoughts to reside in, but is it not too shabby for anyone's liking?

It seemed as if Laplace did not like the dilapidated, worn castle.

–... Even if I want to create something here, I don't have the strength to. All I can do at the moment is maintain this worn-down castle and this throne.

Sumire nodded at her explanation as if convinced by the other woman's appeal.

”Ah, yes! Th-then I'll do the best I can to...”

– Very good... If you collect my fragments, I'll treat you to some tea next time.

Laplace snatched the crown from the air and walked towards Sumire with it. As she did, she whispered a warning.

– However, this power is too much for you. Do not overuse it.

She placed the crown on Sumire's head, and as she did so, purple light began to emanate from it, bathing her surroundings in a bright glow.

*Flaaaash!*

The Castle of Phantasms came back into view.

Laplace's Crown was placed on Sumire's head—it was definite proof that she had inherited the witch's powers.

“Th-that crown! S-so you are... you really are...”

The second coming of the witch.

*Flare!!*

The technique used to perform a contract flared up from Sumire's right hand. Sumire had inherited a power that only Laplace had.

‘This is Laplace's Crown... ’

Sumire looked down listlessly at the succubus. The succubus, in turn, bit her lip. A flush crept up the monster's face.

‘Those domineering eyes that look down on the opponent. That queen-like poise... I... I'm sure of it!’

Sumire felt odd as she wore the crown on her head. Her chest felt cold, and a sense of superiority was beginning to well up inside her.

She spoke something she should not have had knowledge of: the

succubus' true name.

“...Lilith. Remove the curse, immediately.”

Sumire no longer stuttered with the crown on her head.

“I-I'll do anything if you order me to... Master!”

Lilith, her expression filled with joy, began to approach Sumire's feet. But the girl's eyes were full of contempt as she stared down at the boss monster like a bug.

“...Stay away from YuSung-ssi.”

“Eh? N-no, I-I was approaching *you*, Master!”

Even as she said that, Lilith backed off the slightest amount.

Sakura, regaining her faculties, clutched her forehead to stave off her headache.

“Argh, I'm gonna dieeee... my head's going to split open... hurgh...”

“Sakura! Are you okay?!”

Seiji elatedly welcomed her return. Sakura herself, however, was busy looking at both the subservient Lilith and the domineering Sumire.

“What's going on here?”

Asking that was a bit of a moot point, considering the fact that the situation was somewhat impossible to explain.

Amidst the confusion, Sumire casually linked her arm with YuSung's own. Her grin stretched from ear to ear, but there was something wicked buried under it—rather unlike the usual Sumire.

“...YuSung-ssi? I took care of everything.”

YuSung, noticing something was up, used his free arm to lift the crown from Sumire's head.

*Poof!*

Laplace's Crown reverted back to mana and disappeared as soon as it stopped touching her.

It seemed like the crown was the source of Sumire's personality change. As soon as it disappeared, her face immediately turned scarlet. Quickly, she put distance between her and YuSung.

"Uu, uu... I-I'm so sorry! Wh-what on earth was I..."

Whatever the process taken had entailed, Sumire had managed to complete the rank 5 dungeon raid by turning Lilith into her minion. YuSung looked at the embarrassed Sumire and smiled at her.

'...I suppose it's fine if everything turned out well.'

The girl in question was staring at her arm, still hung up on the memory of what had just happened earlier.

'I linked arms with Y-YuSung-ssi... '

Even after turning a rank 5 boss monster into her minion, Sumire's mind was entirely taken over by thoughts of YuSung.

Lilith looked up to watch Sumire's antics. Her mouth curved up into a smile.

"Then... I'll return the treasure that Laplace-nim left with me."

The treasure belonging to a rank 7 boss, not a rank 5 boss...

Even YuSung's interest was piqued at her words.

# Chapter 84

A torch-lit cave...

In order to arrive at that location, one had to open the way by first disarming every single trap in the Castle of Phantasms.

“This fortress... exists so that I can follow the orders from my master. Now that you’ve returned, I don’t need this place anymore!”

Lilith had attached herself right next to Sumire, her eyes solely focused on the girl. Sumire scratched her cheek as if embarrassed.

“Eh? Uh, b-but I’m not Laplace-nim...”

“No, no! Sumire-nim, you’ve inherited her power, and thus you are, without doubt, my master! From now on, I’ll devote myself to serving you!”

The domineering succubus was acting like an excited child to Sumire.

“Fufu, I’ve been waiting so long for my master to return! I’ve been closely guarding all of the treasure you left with me!”

Lilith’s eyes were overflowing with affection. A smile crept up on Sumire’s face as she bashfully laughed at the attention.

Sakura was quietly whispering into Seiji’s ear in the meanwhile.

“...So you’re saying that Sumire is the succubus’ owner now? And thanks to that, we completed the raid?”

“Haha, the full explanation is really long, so... I guess, in short?” Seiji laughed.

Sakura nodded in response. “Hm~ quite the accomplishment. A student with a rank 5 boss monster as their minion? That’s reeeeeeally~ amazing~”

Her tone was sarcastic and loud enough so that it seemed as if she wanted the succubus to hear her.

“...Sounds like you wanted me to hear that.”

The succubus in question threw a look at Sakura, who deftly ignored her and approached Sumire from the side, drawing her into an embrace.

“Sumire~ thank you~! I’m alive thanks to you!”

“Eh? N-no, it wasn’t me! It’s because we all managed to combine our powers!”

“Aw, c’mon, I didn’t even do anything. All I did was get taken down by this dumb, idiotic-looking succubus over here!”

Sakura poked the succubus with her index finger, throwing a vicious jab towards the monster at the end of her sentence. A vein threatened to pop on Lilith’s forehead. She just barely managed to endure the insults though—for Sumire’s sake.

“It’s over here, Master.”

The room they had arrived at was incredibly plain, with a bookshelf adorning the place. The succubus walked towards said bookshelf and took out a diary from it before returning back to Sumire’s side.

The diary began to glow, reacting to Sumire.

*Flash!!*

Lilith offered the book to the girl.

“Master told me to protect this diary, no matter what,” she said, voice



soft.

“Th-this is...”

*Tap.*

When Sumire touched the book, the purple light began to glow even brighter.

‘I-I’m sure of it... this is the second fragment.’

*Fshh!!*

The light emanating from the diary was sucked into Sumire through her fingertips.

*Vween!*

**[Deciphering the language using data stored in the Pocket.]**

**[Deciphering complete.]**

**[The item in question is the (Witch’s Fragment–Laplace’s Diary).]**

The Pocket began explaining the situation in a detailed manner through its hologram.

**[You have obtained (Laplace’s Throne) as a Skill from the Witch’s second fragment.]**

The light from the diary faded as Sumire absorbed all of its power.

“...This is where my role ends. I will leave your treatment of me to you now, Master.”

Saying so, Lilith bowed down on one knee for Sumire. No matter what her order would be, the succubus’ loyalty towards her would not waver.

Sumire looked at YuSung in a plea for help.

“Y-YuSung-ssi...”

Something to be thankful about was the fact that the Castle of Phantasms was rather far away from the city.

YuSung calmly opened his mouth after pondering the situation.

“...The important thing here is to get approval from the Association.”

“...Heeh, I guess,” Sakura sighed, looking at the succubus on one knee. “I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep well tonight if we kill off something with this high of an intelligence, and she already swore that she would obey Sumire and all that~”

For whatever reason, she was taking the succubus’ side.

Seiji laughed boisterously to his heart’s content. “I’ll go with what you guys decide, no matter what! The raid succeeded due to you guys, after all!”

Sumire’s newly-acquired power, and Lilith, who had become her minion...

What YuSung needed at the moment was someone from the Association who would understand the situation and help them.

As it happened, he had quite the reliable person in mind.

“Alright, then. I’ll try to ask for help from the Association president for this incident.”

The person YuSung had chosen to contact was Kang YuChan, the Fist King’s old friend—he was the highest authority in the Association.

“Th-the Association president?!” Sakura looked amazed. “Whoa~ j-just who are you?”

Sumire smiled and stretched out a hand towards Lilith.

“Then I’ll be in your care, Lilith-ssi!”

Lilith was a lonely existence after parting with her master, Laplace. To her, Sumire’s existence was a blessing unto itself, and to top it off, she was treating her with an excessive amount of kindness.

Lilith vehemently shook her head. “Lilith-ssi? N-no, you are the one who has inherited Laplace-nim’s will! Feel free to call me Lili in a casual manner!”

Not a single shred of the dignity belonging to a rank 5 boss could be seen in her.

Sakura sighed as she stared at the glittering eyes of the succubus. “I really have to work hard, huh. Losing to a puppy like that?”

Sumire smiled bashfully at Lilith’s passionate show of loyalty.

“Ah, o-okay! L-Lili-ssi! I’ll be in your care!”

On one side was Lilith, who was crying tears of joy over finding her true master, and on the other was Sumire, who was watching the succubus and smiling.



YuSung finally relaxed, letting go of the tension he had held onto for that entire time.

‘So clearing the rank 5 dungeon is also a success...’

As the party leader, the raid had become the perfect opportunity to strengthen both Sumire's abilities and their party's overall combat power.

'It's a good thing that Sumire managed to get the fragment. She'll be able to become stronger as she fights in the International Competition and climbs the Tower.'

YuSung, who himself had been able to become strong through the Fist King's teachings, was planning on pulling his party member, Sumire, up with him.

\* \* \*

Choten Academy's portal zone...

Students were lined up next to the portal, as per usual. Seiji took the time to give YuSung a courteous bow in farewell.

"Korean team, no, Shin YuSung! We learned something proper from you guys during this raid!"

The term "hot-blooded" fit him like a glove.

Seiji raised his eyes to look at YuSung and laughed boisterously.

"But we won't lose at the International Competition, alright? Our goal is to be at the top of the world, and that includes Korea, too, of course!"

He held out a hand to shake, and YuSung smiled and clasped it with his own.

"Sounds good. I'll be looking forward to the International Competition."

"Hmm~ how passionate. Seiji, are you already attached to YuSung?" Sakura said, calling YuSung in a familiar manner.

Sumire covertly tried to scan the portal zone, which was filled with other students.

Seiji, seeing her do that, smiled bitterly. "...Isshin, that guy. Don't bother looking for him. It looks like he didn't come here today, either."

"Well~ considering his personality, it might be weirder if he actually *had* come, right?" Sakura added, butting in.

Sumire, pensive, shook her head.

"N-no, it's fine! I'm the one who was in the wrong... there's no helping it... if he doesn't forgive me."

Saying that, she forced herself to laugh.

It wasn't like she couldn't understand Isshin's attitude. The facts were that she had abandoned her fellow party members and fled to Korea without even a single word.

"Sumire, Isshin is—"

"Stop it," Sakura interrupted Seiji right as he was about to say something. "It's a good day. Let's stop talking about Isshin, alright? It's not like they have a particularly good relationship together or anything."

"...That's true."

Yamada, the teacher in charge, had been listening to the children talk without so much as a peep. Finally, he opened their mouth and began to speak, eyes tired.

"It looks like you've all finished talking with each other. I'll open the portal now, then."

*Vmmm!*

The portal began to activate with a grandiose sound. It was time for YuSung and Sumire, the principal actors of the dungeon raid, to take their victory lap back home.

\* \* \*

The west side of the Italian Peninsula, the Tyrrhenian Sea...

– *Squawk! Squawk!*

– *Splash! Boom!*

The cries of seagulls ringing in the air... The sound of waves splashing in the sea... The yacht floating on the waters was nothing short of paradise, but the party members of Bianca ACademy were not on the yacht for the purpose of taking a vacation.

Their goal was to hunt monsters on the Sicilian Strait.

The brown-haired girl was fiddling with her glasses while muttering, book gripped in her hand.

“We will soon arrive at the Sicilian Strait. For the record, our destination, Lampedusa, is an island marked by the Association as...”

“Sophia, why don’t you save that talk for after we arrive at the island?”

A handsome young man with blond hair stopped Sophia’s mumbling in its tracks with a bright grin on his face. Leo Este was first in the student rankings among all of the first-year students in Bianca Academy, but even with those skills, he had not been chosen as the representative during the Selections. The reason was due to the fact that he had lost to a newly-participating student.

“Why don’t we introduce ourselves to each other instead...? Since we were oh-so-suddenly put into a party together.”

Leo, true to his nickname as the Sun Knight, was a boy with a warm personality. Thanks to it, he had an easy time becoming friends with

others up to that point.

“What do you think, Miss Adela?”

But Adela was the exception.

A fascinating woman who had suddenly returned from Korea to recapture the title of first place in Italy, her immense skills had overwhelmed everyone.

Adela’s personality was as cold as the winter, and the frozen walls around her were stronger than anything in existence—she was someone that even Leo had trouble dealing with.

Seeing that she did not reply to his question, Leo smiled lightly and began introducing himself to start.

“My name is Leo Este. I use the Solar Blade, an artifact passed down throughout my family line, as my weapon.”

He looked at Sophia, indicating that it was her turn next. Sophia fiddled with her glasses.

“My name is... Sophia Rossi. If nothing else, I’m confident in my theory. My grades are at the top of our year.”

Adela continued to stare at the horizon with expressionless eyes.

They were called her party members, but at the end of the day, they were nothing more than strangers to her. Adela had always acted on her own—it was the first time she had ever been a leader of a party.

But there was a reason as to why she had done so.

‘...Since that was the condition they gave me.’

The headmaster of Bianca and the Italian Hunter’s Association branch had given Adela a condition to follow: put the first and second in students rankings—Leo and Sophia—in her party. In exchange, they



would let her participate in the Selections and enroll her into Bianca Academy.

Adela had handily accepted the terms. She could easily accept conditions of that caliber if it meant that she could fight YuSung, who had beaten her before.

“...Adela Ortensia, my ability is Cryokinesis.”

Leo felt rather embarrassed at her short introduction. However, the girl continued.

“And my goal...”

Her eyes looked towards Leo and Sophia.

“Is to win at the International Competition.”

The two could feel an oddly strong resolve coming through her listless tone.

Adela once again spun her gaze around to stare at the horizon.

“In order to do that...” she began to mutter, quietly, “I will need your help.”

The statement itself was nothing surprising to hear since one couldn’t participate in the International Competition alone, but Leo and Sophia seemed satisfied by the answer as they looked at each other and smiled.

“Alright, then. Let’s all do our best!”

“I can theoretically deduce that Italy’s percentage chance of winning is quite high, provided that you cooperate, Miss Adela...”

“You’re supposed to say that we’ll definitely win in situations like these, Sophia.”

Leaving the noisy conversation behind her, Adela tossed her hair back her as a certain someone popped up in her head.

‘...This time, things will be different.’

# Chapter 85

The day after the expedition...

The clubroom was unusually rowdy.

“Eyy, it’s our party leader! He’s back!”

“YuSung-ah, Sumire. Congrats, both of you! Conquering a rank 5 dungeon, huh?!”

Amy and SiWoo welcomed them both with glittering eyes. Sumire, despite being the one to contribute the most, was embarrassed by their reception.

“I-I didn’t do anything! YuSung-ssi did...”

“W-wait, hold on!” Amy interrupted in fascination. “When did you drop Party Leader-nim’s surname, Sumire?! Did something happen while I wasn’t around?!”

Sumire frantically waved her hands. “N-no! Th-that’s just...!”

“Hey! What do you mean by, ‘did something happen’? Who do you think YuSung is?” rebutted SiWoo, easily dispersing Amy’s suspicions.

The girl in question sighed and shook her head. “Haah, if my schedule wasn’t packed... I could’ve helped out in the raid myself! Ah, and I could’ve showed off my skills, too~”

Chortling, Amy moved right beside YuSung and began whispering to him.

“Fufu, you checked your account, yes? I gave you your portion of the money we earned during the Representative Selections! I’m pretty thorough about stuff like this.”

“Thanks, Amy. Your donations have been a great help in maintaining our clubroom, and I can even save some of it.”

“Saving money~ nice~ who knows what’ll happen someday, after all.”

Amy nodded in agreement, then looked back at Sumire.

“Hehe~ speaking of... expedition raids give you a bunch of commission money, don’t they? Congrats, Sumire~!”

“Eh? Commission?”

“For getting rid of the threat towards the citizens. It’s a rank 5 dungeon, to boot, so you’ll be getting a couple dozen million won at the least.”

“Eh... eh?!”

Sumire’s eyes widened comically.

“...A C-couple dozen million won?”

The only money Sumire had earned up to that point was the grant given to the Sevens students, and even then, most of it was sent back home. She had been living a rather meager lifestyle due to that, considering her status as a Seven.

To think that just one job could net her tens of millions of won... But Amy had an even more surprising fact to tell her.

“They give you more for dungeons that contain expensive material. To be honest, a place like that castle is on the lower end.”

“S-several dozen million won... is... on the lower end?”

“Yes.” YuSung stepped in with a calm voice while Sumire was busy trying to recover from her shock. “Our commission was 40 million won. If we divide that by half, it’s 20 million.”

“Uu, uhh... I-I don’t need... that much money...”

The shock seemed to spur Sumire on to refuse the reward, despite the fact that she was the one who needed it the most.

YuSung shook his head. “No, you must take it. This is your half of our earnings.”

Her circumstances were different from EunAh’s. To EunAh, it was a case of ‘really not needing it’ to the point where she hadn’t accepted the money because it was chump change that she couldn’t be bothered to sign for. It was clear, however, that the commission money from the raid would be of huge help to Sumire.

“20... 20 million won...” she muttered.

Amy sipped her cup of black tea and chose that moment to speak up.

“Hey, Party Leader-nim~ You know that it’s going to be the ‘Tower Day’ festival soon, right?”

Tower Day...

It was an international holiday held to celebrate the day when humankind had first conquered the 60th floor of the tower.

It was a celebration of especially great importance to hunters. Thanks to that fact, all hunter academies, including Gaon, celebrated hunters who had conquered the 60th floor on ‘Tower Day’ and held festivals in order to share the joy.

SiWoo shrugged. “Their true intentions are so obvious. Holding our school festival at the same time as an international holiday? It’s just a ploy to reduce the number of breaks we have.”

Amy laughed. “Aw, so what? It’s still fun! We can all eat yummy foods together! Dance together! Participate in events together! Broadcast together!”

“...Why did you shove broadcasting in there? Don’t tell me you’re

planning on making money off our YuSung...”

“Huh?! N-naw... I mean, I’d be really happy if our party leader did an interview for me, but... and the viewers would really appreciate it, too, but... I wasn’t actually going to ask him that right now, you know? Hehe.”

Amy turned her narrowed gaze towards YuSung.

“Who are you going to go to the festival with, Party Leader-nim? You’re so popular... I bet you’ve already gotten a bunch of partner requests...”

She wiggled her eyebrows, mouth stretched into a bashful smile.

YuSung shook his head.

“Not a single one so far.”

“What? No partner requests, YuSung?”

SiWoo’s face seemed to say that he found this fact hard to believe. Of course he did. By SiWoo’s standards, the idea of YuSung not getting any partner requests literally did not compute to him.

“Th-that’s really weird. Even I got three requests...”

“Is that so?”

YuSung didn’t seem to be particularly interested in the festival. To him, the time he spent with his party members and the bond he shared with his comrades was enough.

On the other hand, Sumire, who had been listening in, was giving looks off to her side—towards YuSung.

‘I-I want to be... ’

It was something that she wanted to be selfish about, just once. Even

as she tried to work up her courage, however, the clubroom just had too many people in it at the moment.

‘...YuSung-ssi’s festival partner!’

In contrast to her thoughts, all Sumire was doing on the outside was fiddling with her fingers.

Not knowing the other girl’s inner turmoil, Amy spoke up.

“Come to think of it, Party Leader-nim~ you have kind of a fantastical image, right? People might have a hard time approaching you! Why don’t we do some broadcasts to fix that? Oh, and some interviews!”

The corner of YuSung’s mouth twitched up into a smile as she attempted to appeal to him.

“Sure, I’ll think about it.”

Sumire’s heart sank as she watched all of that happen.

‘I-I really want to be his partner... no matter what... ’

And just as she was about to grab his clothes to get his attention, YuSung stood up from his seat.

“Looks like it’s time. I’ll be somewhere for just a moment.”

Amy, quick on the uptake, immediately realized where YuSung was going.

“Aha~ you’re going to go sign, right?”

“Oh, right, the reward money!”

SiWoo nodded, also just understanding. The two waved their hands at YuSung in farewell.

“I’ll be back, then.”

*Shut.*

Like that, YuSung walked out and closed the door to the clubroom.

Sumire stared at the door, dazed. She had managed to lose her opportunity. But she regained her senses quite soon.

‘...Right, my P-Pocket!’

The usual Sumire had never sent a message to anyone first. That day, however, was the day where she would have to change that and gather up her courage.

Sumire clenched her fist and stared at her Pocket.

\* \* \*

*Step, step.*

Gaon, the greatest academy in Korea.

Its size, and, of course, its facilities, were gigantic.

‘...Even the school’s interior is quite large.’

Two S Class students were walking towards him from the other end of the long, stretched-out hallway.

“Not even I could hold back. The heck was I supposed to do?!”

“And that’s how you guys started arguing?”

The owners of these voices were Lee ChaeHyun and Min SungHyuk, the latter being one of YuSung’s acquaintances.

“Those A Class guys don’t even know their place, trying to butt heads with us S class!”



ChaeHyun's eyes crinkled under her bob-cut bangs.

"You're right, we can't just let them do that," replied SungHyuk calmly. "Those Class A people are getting real haughty now that Adela's gone..."

"Set them straight, won't you? Since Kim EunAh isn't even around lately."

ChaeHyun let out a short laugh until she noticed YuSung. She tapped SungHyuk to get his attention.

Only then did the S Class boy notice they had company. He gave YuSung a genial smile.

"...Hello. You remember me, right? We've met before."

YuSung did remember. SungHyuk was the student who had asked him, in Shin HaYoon's stead, to apply to her club.

"Yes, I do."

"I watched the Selections. Winning against Adela... I can see why Shin HaYoon-sunbae wanted you... You know that she recently became president, yes? Student council president, that is."

TL/N: Sunbae is a title given to upperclassmen in schools or seniors in your workplace of similar or slightly greater standing than you.

—A threat coated with a smile. The power that Gaon's student council president held in the school was immense.

But that was all SungHyuk could actually do because YuSung had his skills, which won him the right to become Korea's representative, and the backing of Kang YuChan and the Fist King behind him.

"I do."

"Okay, then. Feel free to talk to me anytime you decide to change

your mind. Our club's doors are always open for you."

SungHyuk ended his speech with a friendly smile.

YuSung shook his head. "No, I'll refuse the offer."

"...Is that so?"

The S Class boy didn't like YuSung. When Adela returned back to her home country, he became the class president of S Class. On top of that, he had garnered the favor of the student council president, HaYoon.

The boy in front of him currently had the highest amount of authority among all of the first years.

'Even so... I can't touch him.'

First of all, YuSung was just too strong.

He was a monster who had beaten Adela, who herself had been a source of awe for her class.

'...There's no need to cause any trouble.'

Finishing his calculations, SungHyuk scratched his head in an apologetic manner and laughed.

"You shot down the offer so hard, I'm a little embarrassed about it. Just think on it for a while, alright?"

With that, SungHyuk and ChaeHyun disappeared.

YuSung resumed walking along the corridor. It looked like some of the clubs were using their classrooms instead of their clubrooms in order to get ready for the festival.

"C'mon, you think people are actually gonna be frightened of what you made here? Not even a grade schooler is gonna be scared by this!"

Park HaWon, D Class's president, was scolding a pouting Ju HaJIn.

‘...Ah, they're preparing for an event, huh?’

Only then did dYuSung realize that the school was preparing something on such a grand scale. It was due to the fact that he had been rather busy with his various extracurriculars.

‘A festival...’

YuSung, for the first time, tried digging into his mind for any memories of festivals he may have participated in. He had never gone to one on Martial Spirits' Mountain, of course, but he had the faintest of memories of the time he spent with the Shin-oh family—back when he was less than five years old.

[Did you know? Tomorrow's 'Tower Day'.]

HaYoon had been five years old.

[Huh? I dunno. What's that?]

And YuSung had only been four years old.

Back during his childhood, YuSung had always thought that his sister was someone incredible. Despite only being one year older than him, she knew so much more.

That was the reason why HaYoon had been called a genius, called an elite among a family of elites.

[Listen carefully. Tower Day is when we thank the hunters who conquered the Tower.]

[Why do we thank them?]

*Tilt.*

As little YuSung tilted his head in confusion, HaYoon—herself only

five years of age—narrowed her eyes and smirked as if delighted.



[...Because they're incredible people. Those without power are supposed to hold those who do in reverence.]

Despite her age, HaYoon was a genius who had already studied material at the high school level. Her words were much too complicated for four-year-old YuSung.

[I don't... really get it.]

[I didn't either. But I'm sure you will soon.]

She ended her sentence with a smile.

The YuSung back then thought HaYoon was amazing. But now, things were different.

*Knock knock.*

He knocked on the door leading into the private office; soon after, it opened.

“Come in.”

The person who had opened the door for him was a second year student at Gaon, Lee Hyuk.

And the one in the office who was smiling as she greeted YuSung was...

“...So you're here, little brother?”

Gaon's student council president and the successor of the Shin-oh family, Shin HaYoon.

# Chapter 86

HaYoon was sitting in her chair, a bright grin on her face. She wore the authority granted to a student council president like a well-fitted glove.

It was a reunion that was a long time coming.

“Fufu, you’re ignoring me? Really... I’m hurt.”

HaYoon had her fingers steeped together, wearing a carefree expression. She had a strong will that crushed others underneath her. YuSung, however, was no longer the young child who was easily influenced by his older sister.

“I came here to get my reward for the expedition raid.”

YuSung stated his request out loud, ignoring HaYoon’s words. The girl, in response, narrowed her eyes.

“I received the report from the Japanese side. The Castle of Phantasms, right? The commission fee has been deposited. You and that other student... Suire? Will receive it soon.”

*Taptaptap.*

HaYoon tapped her desk with her fingers, proof that she was lost in thought.

She grabbed a sheet of paper and stretched it out towards YuSung.

“Sign this document.”

Left without any other option, he sat down in the chair at the desk facing his sister. HaYoon used this opportunity to her fullest.

“Oh, our family head has been looking for you, by the way. He really wants to meet you... We’re family, after all.”

She smiled while watching YuSung write. Even after bringing up the topic, her face didn’t change one bit. YuSung, on the other hand, felt uncomfortable.

“My only family is my master.”

To him, the Shin-oh household that had abandoned him for his F-rank Trait was no longer family to him. His family was the Fist King who had raised him and his fellow party members who he had gained various experiences with.

“Is that so?... Noona doesn’t think so, though.”

It didn’t seem like HaYoon was willing to back down, however. YuSung had the blood of the Shin-oh family in his veins, and he had the skills to participate in the Representative Selections. To her, YuSung was a fruit too sweet to not bite into.

“You know what sort of personality I have, right?”

Her gaze bore into YuSung. Eyes that had never seen defiance before aimed towards him, ever since they had been little.

But he stayed adamant. “...My thoughts on this matter won’t change no matter what you say to me.”

YuSung’s refusal was curt and harsh as he dropped the formalities.

“Is that so?”

HaYoon’s voice turned frigid and hard like ice for a moment. She quickly regained her easygoing attitude right afterwards.

“...YuSung-ah, you’ll regret this. I always get what I want.”

Her eyes crinkled around the corners in a facsimile of a smile.

“...I already told you,” he cut in, words as sharp as a blade, “I made up my mind. Threats won’t work on me.”

He handed the document back to her.

The tension in the room was palpable as HaYoon checked the paper, head tilted in one direction.

And right then, someone hurriedly opened the door.

*Swing!*

“President-nim! There’s trouble! Inno Academy suddenly...!”

A male student suddenly appeared.

HaYoon creased her brow; then made a squeezing motion with her fist.

*Ssst!*

Mana flowed out the other hand. As she did so, the male student began clutching his neck as breathless groans began to come out of his mouth.

“Urk, m-my throat...”

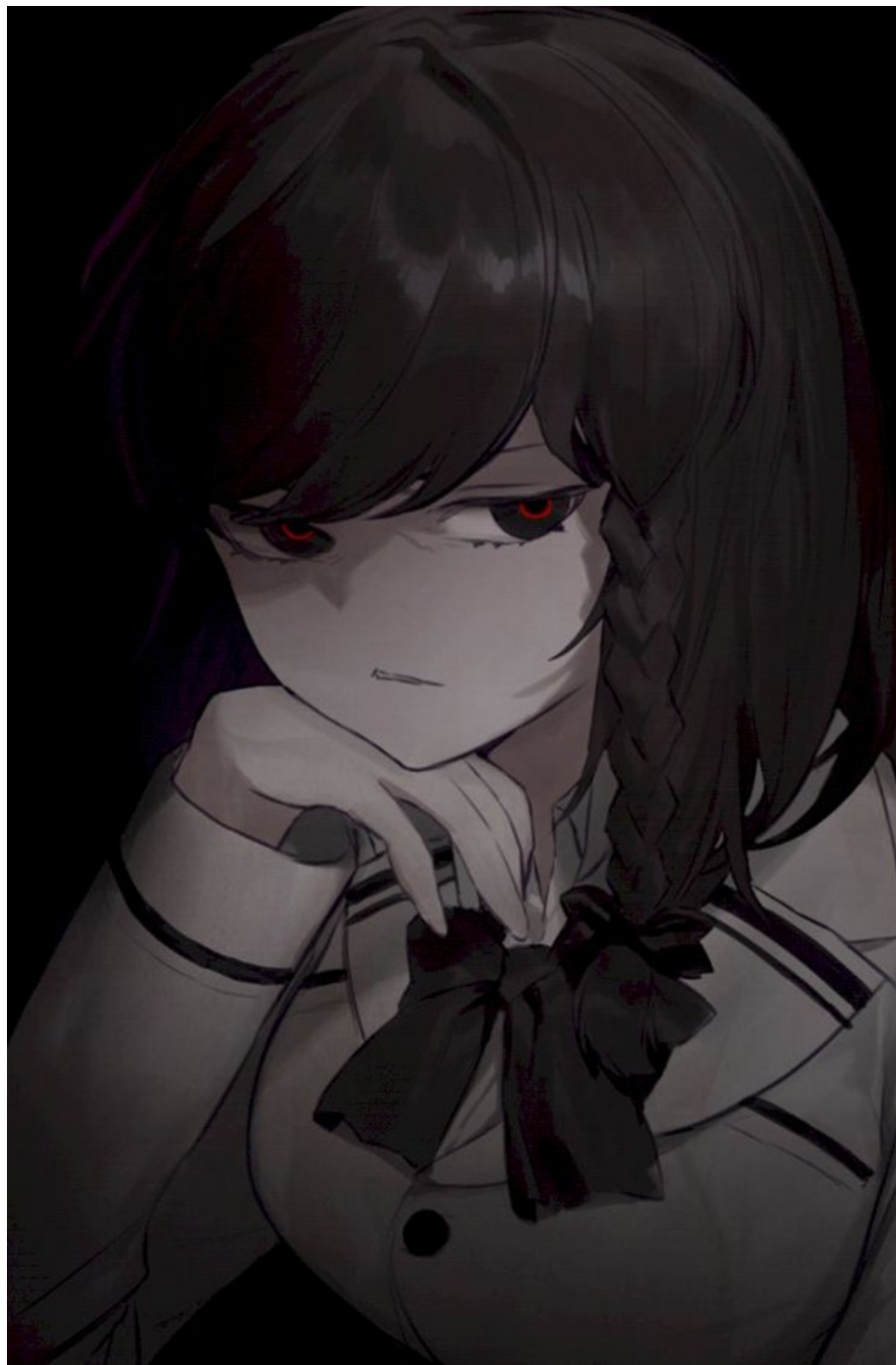
“HaYoon-ah!” Lee Hyuk, the vice-president, quickly tried to stop her.  
“That’s too much!”

“Don’t use my name.”

Her tone was calm as she addressed Lee Hyuk, even as she choked the other student out.

“Lee Hyuk, didn’t I tell the club members to always knock whenever I’m having a one-to-one with someone?”





\* \* \*

She stared at the male student contemptuously as if he was a bug. Nervous, Lee Hyuk kept his reply short, stuttering all the while.

“Y-you did.”

“Then what do the actions of this first-year club member mean? Ah... a challenge aimed against me?”

HaYoon lifted her clenched fist in the air. As she did so, the male student rose as well. It was the power of her Trait, Telekinesis, that had made her the strongest.

Her fist unclenched, and the student fell on the floor.

*Boom!*

“Gasp, c-cough, cough! I-I’m sorry!”

“...Shut up and leave. I’m having a conversation with my little brother over here.”

The student did so hurriedly, Lee Hyuk following right behind.

The situation had become a complete mess. Even so, HaYoon smiled brightly as if nothing had happened.

“YuSung-ah, I’m not speaking threats to you. This isn’t a warning, either.”

The smile was still on her face, but YuSung could tell that she was in a bad mood. He had spent his childhood with her, after all.

“This is a notice.”

*Tap.*

HaYoon’s finger tapped the surface of her desk.

“I know you. You’re aloof, with strong willpower. You’ll endure anything no matter what happens.

*Tap.*

Her finger tapped at a steady rhythm as she finished her speech.

“...But will your comrades be the same?”

She closed her mouth around a brief grin. Her face betrayed the enjoyment she got out of watching YuSung.

*Tap.*

“I can tell. They’re important to you, aren’t they?”

YuSung’s expression stiffened into something cold. Seeing that, HaYoon snickered, covering her mouth with her hand.

*Tap.*

“Kuku. Don’t look at me with such a scary expression on your face. Isn’t it obvious?”

*Tap.*

“Your first comrades... of course they would be special to you.”

*Tap.*

“You and me. We’re not anywhere close to affectionate. I can tell that, too.”

HaYoon stopped tapping the table. Even as her words were quiet, an incredible presence was exuding from her form.

“I’m not a nice person. I don’t let things go, and I never yield what’s mine. Anything I want, I get.”

She stood up from her chair and walked around the table, right next to YuSung.

Leaning into his ear, she began to whisper.

“...And that’s why I’m going to make you suffer. Slowly. Your precious people, those who become friendly towards you, everyone.”

HaYoon stretched her arms out from behind YuSung, twin snakes encircling his neck.

“And wouldn’t someone as soft-hearted as you... come to me on your own and beg, eventually?”

Laughter ripped out of HaYoon’s throat.

YuSung knew, as he was once part of her family, that her words were not a bluff.

“Don’t touch my party members.”

Even so, he calmly warned the other girl.

No matter what sort of circumstances may happen, he had no plan of yielding. He didn’t even want to run away—he wanted to confront her head-on.

*Slide.*

HaYoon removed herself from YuSung at his show of defiance and walked back to her seat.

“Fufu, just kidding. I would never do that to my cute little brother.”

She grabbed the document with her hand and smiled once more, this time benign.

“Go on, then. Your commission will be deposited to you shortly.”

\* \* \*

YuSung left the student council room and walked along the hallway. He pondered the words that HaYoon had said to him earlier.

‘The family head... So Father wants to meet me?’

He had long forgotten about his entire family, only for them to try and contact him when news of his exploits were beginning to spread. The reason behind their sudden movements was clear as day.

‘Well... it doesn’t matter. I have no desire to go back to them.’

And just as he had gathered his thoughts into order, his Pocket rang.

*Ring!*

Someone had sent him a message.

YuSung checked his Pocket, only to realize that it wasn’t a private message to him, but to the F Class group chat.

**[Renia ain(‘t h)eR: Guysssssssszzzzzz huge  
problemmmmmMMMM!!!]**

**[Renia ain(‘t h)eR: D Class are also gonna do a haunted house for  
the festival!!!]**

**[Lee SeeTwo: What—? So we just happened to overlap?]**

**[Renia ain(‘t h)eR: ;w; ;w; ;w; ;w; Who knew this would  
happen?]**

Only then did YuSung realize that F Class was preparing for the festival as well.

‘...So we’re doing a haunted house. I see.’

YuSung remembered enjoying his experience with one at the Shinsung group’s theme park.

The most important thing about the haunted house experience was, bar none, the design for the ghosts’ costumes. There was some sort of idea there that was flickering on and off in his head.

‘I feel like something’s right in the back of my mind...’

While he was ruminating over it, his Pocket rang once more with a message notification.

**[すみれ: YuSung-ssi! Have you finished your errand? (๑ ' ˘ ๑?)]**

**[すみれ: Ah, are you busy at the moment?]**

**[すみれ:... ' π へ π ` As I thought, you are.]**

At some point, Sumire had found the time to deposit a pile of messages in YuSung’s inbox.

The lightbulb in his brain went off.

**[Shin YuSung: Sumire]**

All he sent was one name. The recipient, however, replied at lightning-fast speeds.

**[すみれ: (☆● u ●,,) Ah, YuSung-ssi, you were here?!]**

**[Shin YuSung: Sumire I have a request.]**

He had a good idea in mind.

\* \* \*

*Gulp.*

**[Shin YuSung: Sumire I have a request.]**

Sumire was boring a hole into the hologram her Pocket was displayed. Her arms were shaking violently.

‘N-no way, is this...!’

She bit her lip, impatience clear on her face. She was currently sitting on a sofa.

‘...A-a partner request?’

Her anticipation was threatening to burst out of her no matter how much she tried to calm herself down. The festival was right around the corner—what else could this request from YuSung be other than one asking to be her partner?

‘Of course, YuSung-ssi would be fine... even if he went with someone that wasn’t me. But still, I’m... his party member, so.’

*Ring!*

YuSung’s reply had been sent to her Pocket.

No matter how hard the girl tried, however, she couldn’t muster up the courage to read the text he had sent.

‘M-maybe just a little bit... ’

Sumire closed her eyes into slits as she carefully checked the first bit of the message.

**[Shin YuSung: For this festival...]**

‘Th-this festival... j-just as I thought! It’s gonna say ‘this festival’s partner’, right?!’

She had cooked up a scenario in her head with the limited amount of information she had gotten. Unable to bear her anticipation anymore, Sumire opened the rest of the text up.

**[Shin YuSung: For this festival, I think your undead will do a great job playing the role of the ghosts, Sumire.]**

“Ah. Uu, uuu...”

She sent him a reply, tears gathering in her eyes.

**[すみれ: Okay...! Leave it to me!]**



# Chapter 87

Class A, first-years...

The overall mood of the student body was uplifted, as the festival was right around the corner.

“Do you have any plans during the festival?”

“Me? ‘Course I do. What, you wanna be included?”

The throng of students were talking with each other about their schedules for the festival.

“Aren’t you excited for the next intramural competition? Since Adela isn’t here anymore.”

“S Class is free now~ I bet EunAh will destroy someone on Min SungHyuk’s level.”

They were also celebrating Adela’s return to her homeland.

“Did you guys decide on a partner?”

“Me? Who knows~”

“Why are you hiding it? Just tell me!”

The mass of students were also trying to decide on a partner for the various events being held during the festival. Among them, there were a few who were gathered around the most popular students in the school.

“What about you, EunAh?”

"I bet a bunch of boys sent you messages, huh? There's a lot of fun events this time around, too."

"Ah, I bet EunAh's already decided on a partner, then, huh~?"

Students in A Class were gossiping loudly next to EunAh. The girl in question, however, was deep in thought, a grumpy expression on her face.

'...A partner? How am I supposed to have a partner when I completely forgot about the festival in the first place...?'

But in the current situation, it would hurt her pride if she went right out and said that she didn't have a partner.

"Uh... y-yeah?" EunAh replied, a dumbfounded expression on her face.

The eyes of a group of three girls lit up.

"Thought so!"

"Ah, I know who EunAh's partner is!"

"Who is it?"

"Shin YuSung, right?"

"Ahh, you're right! They're in the same party, too!"

As they brought YuSung up, the discussion somehow transitioned from the original topic of partners to being about him.

"...Okay, to be honest, isn't he super hot?"

"Right? And for starters, he's strong! He won against Adela, too!"

"I guess he's a good match for EunAh in that sense, huh?"

As the gaggle of girls continued to talk to each other, EunAh began to think about him herself.

‘...Shin YuSung?’

It had been a while since EunAh had seen him, owing to the fact that she spent her time with JunHyuk, who had woken up from his coma. She had coincidentally been thinking of meeting with the boy to express her gratitude.

The festival was a good opportunity to do so.

But there was something she was still mulling over.

‘I just... happen to have something I want to say to him.’

The voices of the female students talking next to her no longer reached her ears.

‘I-if I initiate the conversation... I just want to talk to him. But if I do this, won’t it look kind of weird?’

Something about asking YuSung whether he had a partner or not felt like she was losing in some way. Her heart kept flip-flopping back and forth.

Even when the girls next to her had split up to do their own things, EunAh remained lost in her thoughts.

‘...I mean, the more I think about it, isn’t it alright for me to ask him? It’s nothing that important, right? We’re also fellow party members... ’

The more she continued to think, the more EunAh began to rationalize it in her mind.

‘Actually... isn’t it weirder to be self-conscious about it?’

Finished with her excuses, she sent a message to YuSung with an unburdened mind.

**[KimsilverA: What are you doing during the festival?]**

EunAh stared at the text she sent with a proud look on her face.

**[Shin YuSung: Haunted house.]**

YuSung replied soon after.

“No, not that...” EunAh muttered.

She sent another text.

**[KimsilverA: Not what your class is doing, what you’re doing apart from it.]**

**[Shin YuSung: I haven't' decided]**

EunAh looked rather pleased at his reply.

Her expression was relaxed as she sent her next message.

**[KimsilverA: Do you wanna hang out around 6, then? You don’t have to if you don’t want to.]**

The last bit of the message was tacked on at the end possibly due to EunAh’s own pride.

In contrast to the casual-sounding message, she was rather conscious of YuSung’s reply.

The five seconds she waited felt longer than ever.

*Ring!*

The text had arrived.

**[Shin YuSung: Okay, sure.]**

He had responded with a ‘yes’.

‘Of course he agreed!’

EunAh leaned her chin against her hand and laughed in a satisfied manner, mood uplifted.

\* \* \*

F Class had gathered in order to prepare for the festival.

Renia, standing in front of the blackboard, nodded her head at the surprise proposal YuSung had suggested. Her expression was serious.

“...Not bad.”

The individual standing near the teacher’s desk was none other than Sumire’s skeleton.

“Cla-clack!”

All she had to do was summon them and they would move on their own. Even SiWoo, who usually nitpicked those things, was impressed with YuSung’s idea.

“It’s true... we won’t be able to find skeletons of this quality anywhere else.”

“Right! And that’s how these undead are gonna make us win against D Class! This owns, Sumire!”

Sumire seemed to be embarrassed at the sincere compliment. Renis herself was in charge of creating the haunted house.

“Eh? I-is it... that good?”

“That good? Phew... bats? Skeletons? Ghouls? It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that your Trait was made to create haunted houses!”

As Renia brought the subject up, the other F Class students also began to praise Sumire's Trait as if on cue.

"This ghoul is really scary..."

"We won't need any costumes or anything, huh?"

"We trust in you, Sumire!"

Against the torrent of interest being shown her way, Sumire could do nothing but smile awkwardly, as usual.

\* \* \*

Seven in the evening...

The students of the Academy headed back to their dorms at a somewhat later time than usual due to their festival preparations.

*Step step.*

Even while YuSung and Sumire were walking to their rooms together, the boy was lost in his thoughts regarding HaYoon.

[I know you. You're aloof, with strong willpower. You'll endure anything, no matter what happens.]

YuSung knew that expression on her face well—it meant that she wanted him.

[...But will your comrades be the same?]

She laughed, mouth closed.

There was no doubt that, assuming it was the usual HaYoon, she would employ any tactics she could in order to obtain him.

YuSung looked at Sumire, who was walking alongside him. The girl had quite the different air to her compared to the gloomy atmosphere

she had when they had first met.

And that didn't apply to just Sumire, either.

'...I bet the same thing has happened to me.'

YuSung truly enjoyed the time he'd spent at Gaon Academy with his party members.

One could say he had learned how to get stronger and how to stand on his own from the Fist King on Martial Spirits' Mountain. In that case, one could also say that he'd learned how to share at Gaon Academy.

How to share the good moments...

And how to share the bad moments.

YuSung had learned many things while experiencing various emotions with others. This, as a given, led to the strengthening of his inner self. However, these developments had also ironically led to the strengthening of his outer, physical self as well—becoming even stronger than he had been back when he had completely dedicated himself to training.

To him, his party members were basically his family.

'...And she's threatening those party members of mine.'

YuSung's expression stiffened into a stone-cold mask. He didn't want to lose anything, or anyone, anymore. He'd endured the tough training on the mountain in order to protect the things he had managed to obtain.

'All I can do is get even stronger.'

*Squeeze—*

YuSung clenched his fists subconsciously.

Sumire stared at YuSung doing so with worry-filled eyes.

For whatever reason, however, she didn't ask him what was on his mind. Instead, she rubbed her chilled hands together and blew hot gusts of air on them.

"Uu... i-it's so chilly, even in April... It should be spring right now, though..."

YuSung was taken out of his musings by Sumire's words.

"...It is."

But even so, there was a shadowed tinge to his usual expression.

The Shin-oh household, who was trying to bring him back again despite the fact that they had abandoned him in the first place. Preparations for the International Competition, where he would prove his strength to the world. Thoughts like those tangled YuSung's mind.

Sumire, seeing his expression, swallowed back whatever she was going to say.

'I-It would be too forward.'

That was the first time she had ever seen YuSung with such a pensive expression.

'...What if I could be YuSung-ssi's strength at times like this? How... nice would that feel?'

Sumire wanted to save YuSung, just as he had saved her before. She wanted to comfort him, just as he had comforted her before. It was the first time that Sumire had ever felt that way towards another person.

Even so, she did not know how she could help him.

*Step step.*



As they walked along the trail, a field of flowers began to spread out in front of them. Sumire, seeing something, stopped in the middle of the field.

“Ah, th-that’s...”

She was pointing towards a white flower. She approached it with a rather cheerful expression, plucking one out of the ground before returning back to YuSung’s side.

“...It’s a white violet”.

“A violet?”

“Yes. I’m... not an expert on flowers or anything, but I do know about this one because we both have the same name. Ah, s-sorry... you probably aren’t interested.”

TL/N: すみれ (Sumire) can also mean violet.

Sumire laughed bashfully. But the boy slowly shook his head.

“I am interested. And even if I wasn’t, the flower has a special meaning to you, right, Sumire?”

Her ears grew hot at YuSung’s considerate words.

‘A special meaning... ’

White violets...

And YuSung.

Sumire recalled what her mother had told her in the past.

[Oh my, a violet! How beautiful! I can’t believe one grew in our backyard...]

[Hm? Why were you named after violets? Well, obviously because...

it's beautiful!]

Suika patted her daughter's back with an exuberant grin on her face before continuing her explanation.

[Sumire, do you know the meaning of the white violet? You don't? Goodness... The name we spent so much effort into making for you...]

She bit her lip with a displeased expression on her face.

[The flower language of the white violet is innocent love!... Sumire, you're proof that Shintaro-san and I loved each other more passionately than anyone else. Smooch!]

Suika ended the conversation with a kiss on Sumire's forehead. An innocent love that needed no other rewards aside from its existence. A love that could sacrifice anything for its sake without an ounce of regret. Sumire could understand a little bit of what her mother had told her.

*Snap.*

After plucking the flower, Sumire placed it right above YuSung's ear. A playful laugh shyly escaped from her lips.

YuSung was struck dumb by the sight. That was the first time he had ever seen her look so cheerful.

“...Sumire.”

The reason the girl was acting in that way was in order to free YuSung from the dark expression he had been wearing all that time.

The school festival was drawing near.

Sumire gathered up a bit more of her courage.

“YuSung-ssi, p-please be my partner for the festival!”

*Flush-*

She ducked her head right after her declaration.

YuSung calmly stared at Sumire before opening his mouth.

“Sorry, I already have plans for the afternoon.”

“...Eh?!”

A completely unforeseen development to Sumire, who up until then was absolutely sure that YuSung did not have his own partner. She was stunned on the spot.



# Chapter 88

In that short period of time, YuSung had managed to schedule a time to meet with EunAh.

“Ah, I-I thought so! Of course Party Leader-nim would... have plans, huh?”

Even though Sumire was trying her best to pretend that she was fine, her face clearly betrayed her disappointment. After looking for an opportunity to ask him all day, she had managed to miss her chance.

It felt like the sky was crumbling down on her.

‘I should have talked to him earlier about this... I’m an idiot... ’

YuSung, seeing Sumire’s reaction, began feeling rather apologetic towards her.

“Sorry. Something suddenly came up at 6PM.”

His plans had been scheduled for 6PM. Hearing that, Sumire carefully spoke up.

“Th-then... are you free before then?”

“I guess so?”

She mulled over his response. There were a lot of things she wanted to do with him, even if it wasn’t during the evening.

“Erm, YuSung-ssi! Then! Is it alright if we! Eat lunch together at 12... N-no! Is it alright if I’m with you from... 9AM and onwards? I’ll... make breakfast for you!”

Sumire's previous expression of despair transformed into one of anticipation.

YuSung nodded his head. "Okay, let's do that."

Sumire wriggled her lips in excitement at his positive response.

'Th-this is amazing!'

Instead of meeting him in the afternoon, Sumire could be with YuSung from and all throughout the morning. In her opinion, it was a much better opportunity for her.

\* \* \*

The Shin-oh family. A hunter household...

The large mansion was one of dozens they owned.

An extravagant water fountain decorated with five lion statues, all with water flowing out of their mouths...

An ocean view that could put a resort to shame...

A garden personally constructed by a first-rate gardener...

A large plot of land covered by high-quality, two-tone artificial turf...

It was all possible due to both the authority they had from colluding with the media and benefits from taking on various special requests. The household even had a mutually beneficial relationship with the president of the Shinsung group on a commission basis. The amount of power they enjoyed in Korea was nearly impossible to imagine.

The biggest reason as to why they had been able to establish all of this was due to their 'might makes right' philosophy—of putting those on the top above all. The Shin-oh family believed only in strength, and their goal was also to maintain their skills and power through said strength.

The family meeting that had been called was a ritual that was a part of that.

“...I apologize for saying this right at the beginning of our meeting, but it’s true that there is a sort of mistrust beginning to seep into our belief of the head’s judgment.”

Park ByungJun was the first to speak up.

He was a master who, due to his well-disciplined mana, looked like a man in his late twenties despite being in his late thirties. He was a hunter recognized on the national scale, owing to the fact that he was ranked sixth.

He was a man with quite a high position, even in the Shin-oh family. But the one who he had aimed his doubts towards was none other than the head of the household, Shin KangYoon.

“...Interesting.”

Shin KangYoon narrowed his eyes. His gaze aimed towards Park ByungJun was filled with a calm but keen energy.

‘How dare someone who was brought in as nothing but a son-in-law act as if he owns the place... ’

But he did not say his thoughts out loud. The head of the Shin-oh household was determined carefully through a vote based on skill. Even if he didn’t like Park ByungJun, the man had his own vote.

He laughed good-naturedly. “Go on, then. Just what is making you distrust my judgment?”

The beautiful woman sitting next to him laughed, a fan covering her mouth.

“Fufu. Don’t you already know the answer to that, dear brother?”

Shin MiHyan.

She also looked to be in her late twenties, but in fact, she was the younger sister of Shin KangYoon by four years.

*Snap!*

Shin MiHyang closed her fan shut in a fanciful manner before placing it inside her bosom. Her mouth quirked up into a smile as everyone's attention was drawn to her.

"It's, of course, about your second child... YuSung. Haven't you also heard of the rumors, brother?"

Even Shin KangYoon's constantly maintained poker face crumbled slightly at the mention of YuSung's name.

—But only for a moment.

His calm demeanor had returned when he spoke.

"Yes... I did hear of him. He's been quite prolific at Gaon, they say."

Shin MiHyang re-opened her fan to hide her lips.

"Huhu, 'quite', you say... you just can't be honest about this, can you?"

Park ByungJun also seemed to find Shin KangYoon's answer to be amusing.

"Any rumor in the hunter world should pass your ears, no? Haha! Your devaluation of him practically shows how much you've been turning a blind eye to this..."

As Shin MiHyang's husband brought the topic up, she also saw herself fit to add onto the pressure.

"Huhu, let's see... how about we just count the things that come to my mind for the moment? Capturing the Rebellion member... becoming the representative for the International Competition. Most recently, I



also heard that he managed to clear a rank 5 dungeon?”

Park ByungJun followed her up on the topic of discussion. “A dungeon in Japan, to boot. Participation in an expedition raid is proof that he’s a student the Hunters’ Association is backing, you know.”

“What would happen if word that the child is from the Shin-oh family gets to the media and spreads across the world? I can already imagine the public’s reactions.”

A nervous air overtook the other members of the family as Shin MiHyang brought up the main topic of the meeting. Even if those with lower than a rank six hunter’s degree of influence had no say or sway in the meeting itself, they all implicitly agreed with her opinion.

“The Shin-oh family didn’t recognize a diamond in the rough that the Fist King recognized. We basically threw a treasure into the trash. Isn’t that embarrassing to you?”

Her direct attack succeeded in making Shin KangYoon grimace once more. Even his strong poker face could not hide his true feelings that time.

“Judging by everyone’s reactions, I can see that you all are rather inclined to agree with what she has said?”

Almost twenty people had gathered for the meeting, yet all they did was glance at each other. The silence stretched on.

Shin KangYoon smirked. “You brought this up when my wife was gone, I see. Quite thoroughly planned.”

“Dear brother, all we did was speak our thoughts. All of this is nothing but some, fufu, *worries* of ours.”

Shin MiHyang’s eyes crinkled at the corners. She was, too, a rank six hunter, a master recognized at the national level. He couldn’t treat her carelessly, even if she was his younger sister.

“Fine. Do hear this, everyone. What do you plan to do if this *worry*

comes to fruition?”

Even as he addressed the entire room, Shin KangYoon’s eyes were solely focused on Shin MiHyang. He suddenly exuded mana from his body, forcibly suppressing his sister with its power.

“Urgh...”

The pressure was strong enough to make it hard to breathe.

Shin KangYoon continued calmly, as if he wanted everyone gathered there to listen to his words.

“I am the sole hunter who has achieved rank seven in the Shin-oh family. Who else is more fit to be at the place of the head... in a household that values strength above all?”

The meeting room was awash in a murderous atmosphere before anything more than the single topic could be brought up.

Right then, a beautiful young man who stood out from the crowd began to speak up.

“All three of you. There’s no need to cause a stir within the Shin-oh household for something that hasn't even happened yet.”

Yu Weol. He had become the youngest hunter to reach rank six at the age of 27. He was participating in the meeting in the stead of YuSung’s mother, Yu MinSeo. Thus, he was the one with the highest authority next to the head.

Shin MiHyang nodded at Yu Weol’s words.

“The young master is right. All we did was express our worries... So don’t take such offense at it. Won’t you, brother?”

*Squeeze!*

Shin KangYoon clenched his fist.

But all he did was let his rage simmer on the inside. He had already anticipated Shin MiHyang and Park ByungJun's actions beforehand, as the two were always vying for his seat at the head. Talk about YuSung was no more than an excuse to bring the topic up.

‘...Still, it's true that this circumstance was something completely unforeseen.’

At five years old, YuSung had been determined to have an F-rank Trait. He had been certain that the boy had no future as a hunter.

But what actually happened spoke otherwise. YuSung was showing off his skills more confidently than any other person.

‘Since things turned out this way... ’

Shin KangYoon, as the head, was going to try and prepare his seat for YuSung to take over. In order to do so, all he could do was believe in HaYoon, who was also attending Gaon Academy.

‘...All I can do is beg that child.’

\* \* \*

A neatly organized dressing room...

But the hundred or so clothes displayed on the hangers were all luxury goods with jaw-dropping price tags.

EunAh would typically say that it was all bothersome and would wear nothing but a t-shirt and jacket, but the next day was not a typical day.

“...H-how about this dress?”

She came out of the room wearing a red dress, embarrassed.

SuHyun mulled it over, a serious expression on her face. “Hmm. It's beautiful, but red is a little...”

“Ah, it doesn’t suit me?”

SuHyun thought about it some more. “First off, I think a more innocent color like... maybe blue? Would suit you better. Seductive and provocative colors like purple and red would be better for when you’re older... you understand what I mean, yes?”

EunAh nodded her head in docile acceptance. “Huh? Sure, I think so.”

SuHyun stood up from her seat and approached the younger girl.

“And strap management is important for off-shoulder dresses. Didn’t I already tell you this?”

“Uh, yeah. Y-you did.”

“You just aren’t very good at this stuff. Come closer.”

SuHyun approached EunAh’s back and adjusted the placement of the red shoulder strap. Her hands then trailed down to the girl’s hips.

“Hey, what are you doing! It tickles!”

“Looks like there’s a little bit more fat on you than before. We’ll have to consider A-line dresses too, at this rate. Since they have wide bottom halves...”

SuHyun groped EunAh’s stomach with a grave expression on her face. Both EunAh’s embarrassment at the fact that she’d gained weight coupled with the odd sense of humiliation from having her stomach touched made her face turn redder and redder.

“I-it’s because I haven’t been moving as often as I was before I was in the hospital!”

“I know that. Do you know how much effort I put into arranging your schedule? But still... I can really feel it.”

*Squish.*

SuHyun continued to prod at her pale belly.

Eventually, EunAh snapped.

“Argh, fine! I gained some weight, okay?! So stop touching it! Is my stomach a lump of clay to you? Why do you keep squishing it?!”

It felt unfair that she had received such humiliating treatment just because she hadn’t exercised for a week.

“Sit back down. I’ll go and get a blue dress on, okay?”

But even throughout all of it, EunAh had long stopped becoming truly angry towards SuHyun. Knowing this, the older woman saw her actions as nothing more than petty complaints.

‘...She’s gotten more and more cute after entering the party. Or maybe it’s because Kim JunHyuk woke up from his coma?’

It felt like she had gained a younger sister. SuHyun watched the girl go into the changing room with a proud look in her eyes.

*Shuffle shuffle.*

Sounds of changing clothes and grumbling could be heard from the other side of the curtain. Right after, EunAh stepped out of the room.



The dress she had on was a refreshing blue with black accents—it made quite the impression.

“Just as I thought...”

SuHyun, moved at the sight, gave her a thumbs up.

“...It’s perfect, Miss.”

# Chapter 89

Evening, in the forest that had been built for Gaon...

A beautiful, bright moon was submerged under the surface of the lake.

A complete silence settled over the area. YuSung focused his concentration.

‘...I want to become stronger.’

YuSung was already plenty strong.

Even in Korea, known internationally for its strong hunters, he was unparalleled among his fellow first-year students.

But he knew a certain fact: that his sister, HaYoon, had cleared a rank 5 dungeon after becoming the student council president. And that definitely was not her full strength.

[This is all that I can do for now.] HaYoon had said to her father after using her Telekinesis to snap the branch off of a tree when she was five.

[‘This is all’? No! Your Trait is stand-out, even among the Shin-oh family. If such a thing as above S-rank existed, Telekinesis would be it.]

[...Thank you very much, father.]

HaYoon responded to her father rather formally.

But as Shin KangYoon turned around and left, her expression changed.

HaYoon lifted one hand with a blank, emotionless face. YuSung stared



at her, dazed.

[...Pfft.]

HaYoon ridiculed the man, then clenched her hand into a fist.

*[Snap! Cracracrack!]*

At the mere age of five...

HaYoon had managed to destroy a large tree using Telekinesis with just one hand. Its trunk, leaves, roots—everything was squeezed into a sphere.

[How stupid.]

YuSung ran away from where he was so that he wouldn't be caught by his sister. He was only four years old at the time and didn't know why he had done so.

And then, the next day...

HaYoon smiled and spoke to YuSung.

[You... saw it, didn't you?]

Even at five years old, her grin inspired terror. He shook his head.

[I didnt...]

[Liar. But YuSung-ah, it doesn't matter what you saw... because no one in this world believes in your words... no, my strength.]

HaYoon continued to smile.

YuSung was incredibly scared of it.

['Why is noona smiling even though she isn't happy?']

Every time he looked at his sister, nothing but questions came up in his head.

Even as a four-year-old, he could tell that there was something different about HaYoon.

[O-okay...]

YuSung sank to the ground as he lost the strength to hold himself up and nodded. As he did so, HaYoon crouched down to look at him straight in the eye.

[You see, YuSung-ah...]

She lifted a finger to her lips, making a 'ssh' motion. Again, her mouth twitched up into a smile, even as she failed to experience any joy.

[...I was born to rule over everyone; to reign over the pathetic masses below my level.]

A mind too advanced for someone at five years of age and a monstrously strong Trait—Shin HaYoon was just too odd of an existence.

‘My sister hid her strength, even at five years of age.’

YuSung heard that HaYoon had forfeited the Representative Selections due to her bad condition on that day.

To him, though, that sounded like a lie. His sister could win in the Selections of whichever country she wanted. However, she never revealed the entirety of her true strength, no matter what.

‘She keeps her cards close to her chest, no matter the occasion... That’s how thorough she is.’

And that HaYoon had designated YuSung as her goal under the condition that she wanted to own him... It may have been due to the Shin-oh family.

‘What she probably wants is... ’

—His complete subservience.

To HaYoon, who ruled over Gaon like an empress, YuSung was something like a dissident of hers. No matter how skilled he was, he was worthless to her as long as he did not act as she pleased.

There was no chance of her giving up on him. Therefore, YuSung had no choice but to face her head-to-head. In order to do that, he needed power.

‘If I want to protect something... ’

He closed his eyes.

A chilling breeze blew, passing by his head alongside his various memories. The memory of him being abandoned, training with his master, his first comrades, and the truths he managed to discover through Sumire and EunAh.

The conclusion he reached was clear.

‘I have no choice but to become stronger than my opponent.’

In order to achieve his goal, and in order to protect what was his, Shin YuSung had to become stronger.

His descent from the mountain was the signal to his complete independence.

He had, simply, belatedly, met the fate that he had avoided at five years old.

‘...In order to free myself from the fetters of the Shin-oh family.’

YuSung slowly drew up mana into his hand. Forming the motions of the Battle God Style, he spread the mana throughout his surroundings in an extremely slow manner.

*Fshh!*

The beautiful lights forming a scattered trail from his hand looked just like fireflies.

In the dark cave that was YuSung's life, the Fist King had handed him a torch to light the path forwards.

Now, it was his turn to make his way into the deep, dark void.

‘In order to keep going forward... ’

YuSung stopped moving, stance ready. He had learned the fourth form of the Battle God Style, but he wasn't just satisfied with that.

Now, he was trying to find a new thread to follow in order to awaken the fifth form.

‘Think... and remember.’

\* \* \*

How could he become stronger than he currently was? How could he reach the fifth form? But the answers did not come to his mind.

[Hm... listen well, YuSung-ah! You'll know how to do it when you learn the fifth form. The Battle God Style is a martial arts style created to fit my physique, so from the fifth form and onwards, you'll have to create your own path that suits your own talents.]

Only then did YuSung realize what Yu WonHak was saying to him. Even the fourth form was a skill that he himself had reinvented.

Yu WonHak's Battle God Style fourth form was the Aura of Self-Protection, which used the energy within himself to deflect and endure attacks performed on his body. But YuSung used the Black Dragon's Body Armor, which not only used his body's energy to defend, but also to attack.

Further guidance was, therefore, unnecessary. It was time for YuSung to go forth on his own, new path, using Yu WonHak's teachings as well as the experiences he had gone through up to that point as foundation.

‘My own Battle God Style... ’

—Was something only he could find.

YuSung thought about his Trait, the thing he had been born with—its was [Heightened Focus], and it was naught but F-rank.

While living on Martial Spirits' Mountain, YuSung had used his Trait without even knowing he had. The superhuman concentration that suddenly developed whenever he thought he was at his limit was what let him endure the hard training throughout the years.

‘What would happen if I grafted my Trait onto the Battle God Style?’

YuSung used his Trait with his eyes open. There was no need to consciously distribute his mana anymore. All he had to do was feel that he had to [concentrate]. His thoughts would speed up, and the world would slow down.

‘Something only I can do... ’

YuSung kept accelerating his thoughts. Using his concentration, he enhanced his senses to their limits.

*Zzt!*

In the stillness around him, the first thing that hit YuSung was sound.

*Flap! Flap!*

To the current him, even the flapping of a butterfly's wings sounded slow and clear. It was YuSung's small world. He felt nothing in that space—or perhaps everything.

‘...What is this vibration I feel around me?’

In the slowed-down time bubble he had created, YuSung felt something he had previously never sensed before.

—They were mana particles.

The mana that he had released earlier was jumping around and creating microscopic vibrations in the air.

‘This is... ’

His mana-sensitive physique and Heightened Focus which could enhance his senses to a superhuman level. That sensation was something that only YuSung, out of all the people in the world, could experience.

‘The mana is vibrating.’

It was like the flap of the butterfly’s wings. No, it was much more orderly and coordinated than that.

‘Is this... the specific wavelength of my own mana?’

YuSung released mana from the tips of his fingers once again. As he did so, the feeling of mana traveling throughout his body was amplified. The movement of the expelled mana looked slow to him.

*...Vmm vmm. Vmm vmm.*

And that time, the vibrations felt different than before. It was subtle enough that other hunters would never be able to feel it, but with YuSung’s [Heightened Focus] his senses could figure it out.

‘The vibrations are different depending on how much mana is expelled as well as how it’s expelled!’

A thought suddenly crossed his head—what would happen if he could cause the same shockwave as expelled mana?

Long ago, he remembered hearing about the ‘mana resonance’ phenomenon from Yu WonHak.

[Mana resonance is very rare! It’s something that a hunter might never see during their entire lifetime!]

According to his story, resonance occurred when the shockwave emitted by the mana they expelled matched wavelengths with the mana it faced off against—it was a rare thing for one to see it with their own eyes.

But when it happened, even Association hunters had cause to be greatly surprised.

[It’s common to see mana shot off into some random direction or disappear entirely. This phenomenon can kill you if you don’t pay proper attention to it.]

‘But what if... I can directly control this phenomenon?’

YuSung heightened his senses even further. Again, he expelled the same shockwave of mana from the tips of his hand.

It was a meticulous process, like one a machine would perform.

*...Vmm. Vmm. Flash!*

The mana YuSung had just expelled began vibrating at the same frequency as the mana already in the air.

As the particles hit each other, they disappeared as if they had never existed in the first place.

*Woosh!!*

YuSung began experiencing the flow of time regularly once more.

“Ugh...”

He felt a bit of dizziness from overdoing it with his training, but even as he wiped the cold sweat from his forehead, YuSung was replaying what had just happened over and over again in his mind.

‘That was definitely... the mana resonance phenomenon. And I... created it.’

Using his innate senses and his Trait, [Heightened Focus], he had managed to create what was previously known to be a rare event that one would be hard-pressed to see more than once in their entire life.

‘If I can use this in an actual fight... ’

Then, just as his master had said, he would be able to create the fifth form of the Battle God Style that belonged solely to him.

His face showcased the pride he felt, even as he was on the verge of collapse.

‘It’s 10PM. I should head back.’

And right when YuSung was checking the time, someone sent him a message.

*Ring!*

[すみれ: YuSung-ssi, tomorrow at 9AM! I’ll be there promptly!]

[すみれ: ‘π∧π’... Please wait a little bit, even if you’re hungry.]

[すみれ: 

YuSung grinned ever so slightly at Sumire’s texts.

‘...So she isn’t nervous when she messages people?’

Perhaps the fulfilled feeling in his heart was due to his successful training session. YuSung was looking forward to the next day.



# Chapter 90

YuSung fell into a deep sleep, possibly due to using up both his physical and mental reserves.

‘...What time is it right now?’

While faint, he had managed to regain some consciousness, which was why he knew that someone was busily preparing his meal on the other side of his closed bedroom door.

“Hmhmhm~♪ Hmhmhm... hmhmm!”

Someone’s voice was quietly humming a lullaby. YuSung smiled slightly and got out of his bed.

‘...So it’s Sumire.’

*Creak.*

He opened his bedroom door. Sumire started at the motion.

“Ah!... Y-you’re awake?! Good timing. I-I bet the racket must have been a bit too loud, and it woke you up, huh?”

“No, it’s alright, I liked the sound. And I had to get up, anyway.”

YuSung checked the time using his Pocket—it was 9:10AM, well past their appointed time.

‘...Good thing I told Sumire my passcode.’

After taking care of his basic morning hygiene, YuSung sat down in the chair. As he did so, Sumire placed a plate laden with her food on the table and took off her apron.

Thick slabs of bacon, crispy slices of toast, a cup of warm milk, and fried eggs.

Sumire took the seat opposite YuSung and watched him with a rather eager expression on her face.

“S-since it’s breakfast, I prepared stuff that wouldn’t be too hard on your digestive system!”

Her expression shifted to nervousness. Sumire only wanted one, small thing, despite the fact that she had spent the morning toiling away at the stove.

‘W-will he like the taste?’

All she wanted was for YuSung to say a single phrase: “delicious”.

Amidst her anticipation, YuSung stabbed a thick slab of bacon with his fork and tore a piece of it away using his mouth. That was due to the fact that he was unused to knife work being used during meals, as he was raised on Martial Spirits’ Mountain.

“H-how is it?” asked Sumire, waiting for YuSung. It was the nerve-wracking moment of truth for her.

“Delicious.”

That one word made Sumire slowly bite her lips and hold back tears.

Being able to cook for YuSung in the morning was one of the happiest moments of her life.

‘This is just like... ’

Due to that, her delusional switch was flipped.

‘...a-a honeymoon?’

A giggle seeped out of Sumire’s mouth.

YuSung, after tasting everything—including the toast—looked at Sumire, only then thinking to ask her something.

“What about your breakfast, Sumire?”

“A-ah? I was thinking of having my own after you finished your meal, YuSung-ssi...”

It was because she had prepared his food before her own. Sumire, of course, didn’t want to miss the sight of YuSung eating her food because she was too busy cooking her own.

“...Aren’t you hungry, though?”

His tone of voice was the same as always, but YuSung was actually rather concerned for the other girl.

“...A-a little?” Sumire was incredibly glad to see him show consideration for her. “Ah, but...! Only a teensy bit! Not enough for you to be worried about, YuSung-ssi... I can just make more now, after all!”

She ended up answering him in a confused manner in the heat of the moment, despite the fact that she really wasn’t all that hungry.

“Then, Sumire, why don’t we eat together instead? I only need to eat half of this for breakfast.”

“Eh? Huh? But...”

She liked it when YuSung ate every last bite of her food, but the piece of bacon outstretched towards her was a completely different story.

His rough knife work could be seen on the edges of the piece of meat.

“Here, Sumire.”

YuSung smiled lightly and nudged the outstretched fork in his hand toward her.

‘Sh-Shin YuSung-ssi... i-is personally feeding me?’

It was something that Sumire could never refuse. Without thinking, she opened her mouth.

*Nom. Munch munch.*

She bowed her head after savoring the flavor of the bacon. While the expression she was wearing was hidden from view, her ears were bright red.

“How is it? Good, right?”

“Y-yes, i-it’s deliciousss...”

“You’re okay with milk and toast, right?”

YuSung’s own expression was completely nonchalant as he looked at the other girl.

Sumire herself already knew that his actions were nothing but simple goodwill. The thought snapped her back to reality, bringing an odd sense of immorality with it.

But even still, she decided to be just a little more selfish.

“...Yu-YuSung-ssi! Th-then... I’d like a b-bit of toast...”

For some reason, she asked for a bite of her own food much like a sinner asking for forgiveness. She didn’t even make a move to grab the toast herself, despite it being near her.

“Here. Bread is delicious when you eat it warm, after all.”

Eventually, YuSung easily took the bread himself and handed it over to Sumire. She munched on the slice of toast, face awash in unimaginable bliss.

“T’sh... r’lly goo’...”

She seemed to think of it as so delicious that tears of joy were springing out from her eyes. YuSung felt his mood lift just watching her.

He needed strength in order to protect even small instances of happiness like that.

\* \* \*

The ‘Tower Day’ festival...

The event that F Class had prepared in the empty auditorium was none other than a haunted house. Their theme was a graveyard of the undead.

“Grr...”

SiWoo was genuinely impressed at the sight of the ghoul as it drooled all over the place.

“...You guys brought dirt? And just how are you gonna clean all of this up later?”

Renia, who was in charge of the haunted house, began shouting a reply in a confident manner.

“Hey! Think about the later, later! Our instructor told us to treat practice like it’s the real deal, remember?!”

“What are you talking about? How does an event count as practice?”

Among the bustle of the crowd of students, Sumire was in the corner of the auditorium, summoning undead from her ring.

“Y-you, go over there... and surprise anyone who appears from that corner. Can you do it?”

“*Clack! Clack!*”

The skeleton rattled its jaws energetically at her command.

Sumire clenched her ring in her hand and mumbled, as she did so, another magic circle was drawn on the ground, summoning a death knight clad in armor.

*Flaaash!*

“Glory to... my master! Command me however... you please!”

“Oh! D-Death knight-ssi... you can go to that corner...”

“So I must cut... the heads of the enemies who... appear from that corner! Blood for... my master! Destruction to... the enemy!”

The death knight lifted its greatsword high up into the air, showing off an aggressive fighting pose.

“Hieek!” Sumire, startled, frantically waved both of her hands. “Y-you can't! All you need to do is surprise them!”

“I-I under... stand!... A fear more terrifying... than death to... the enemy!”

It seemed as if the death knight had managed to get somewhat of a grasp on her intentions.

Sumire began summoning her familiar, who was currently resting at the Castle of Phantasms. A light began to emit from her right hand.

*Flaaaash!*

“Munch. Chew.”

Lilith was in a rather laid-back position and eating chips, but only for a moment, as she quickly dropped the chip bag and stood up from her spot.

“M-master?!”

“Ah, s-sorry! Were you busy?!”

“No, no! I wasn’t! I, Lili, will do anything and go anywhere in any situation if it’s my master’s will! Please, give me a command!”

Lilith seemed to be filled with quite the vigor for some reason. It looked like she had been summoned away while in the middle of eating chips.

“...And this is that succubus? What kind of rank 5 boss eats human snacks?”

At that point, SiWoo was getting sick of retorting to everything—Sumire’s summons defied common sense. Despite that fact, her presence in the haunted house could definitely be felt.

“Kyaaaaa—”

“Ack! It got me! The monster got me!”

“This isn’t a prop! Th-the corpse is moving?!”

“The skeleton’s speaking to me!”

Various screams could be heard throughout the venue. Sumire felt a sense of pride.

Renia was an opportunist at heart, pleased about the unending line leading into their attraction. She approached Sumire.

“YuSung, your idea was amazing! And Sumire, your undead abilities are also amazing!”

“Eh? Th-thank you! But it’s all because everyone worked so hard...”

“Stop! On days like these, there’s no need to be humble! Oogh, you little bundle of luck, you...!”

Renia gave Sumire a tight hug. YuSung smiled slightly at the sight of

them becoming close.

“Renia, how is the festival going so far?”

“We already have 300 customers! And it’s still morning! Didn’t I say this is one of the best ideas ever?”

Indeed, the haunted house that F Class had built was a huge hit. On the other hand, the haunted house that D Class had made had nothing but tumbleweeds rolling through it.

The rumors about F Class’s venue hadn’t only spread through the students...

“So I heard this place is popular?”

“Professor So HaeJung. What a surprise, I didn’t expect to see you here.”

Instructor Lin Xiao and Professor So HaeJung...

It seemed as if talk about the haunted house had managed to reach the faculty as well.

“Hey, everyone!” Renia’s joyous voice cried out, “Let’s power through this until noon! Even with that, we’ve plenty met our quota! Plenty!”

The F Class students rejoiced.

“Woooo! We’re free!”

“Hell yeah! This is all thanks to Sumire!”

“Naw, this is thanks to YuSung’s idea.”

YuSung turned his gaze towards Sumire, body staying still in one place. He had enjoyed the festival even as he was wracking his brains over the problem of Shin HaYoon.



There was still plenty of time until six o'clock, when he had promised to meet EunAh.

“Is there anything you want to do at the festival?” he asked.

“Uh, me? That’s hmm...”

Sumire opened her mouth to respond.

“I definitely want...”

Her answer came surprisingly quickly.

Sumire had probably decided in advance what she wanted to do with YuSung.

# Chapter 91

A miniature drone camera, around the size of an eraser, flew through the air. Amy, a streamer, greeted her audience.

“Tada~ a festival held by Gaon in order to celebrate Tower Day! I’m here to livestream the whole event, everyone~”

The hologram chat window showed the overwhelming enthusiasm from the viewers.

**[LuvUAmy donated 100,000 won!]**

– ehh~

**[AmyChan donated 200,000 won!]**

– likin’ the atmosphere at the start here~

– so what we doin’?

Amy began explaining at the entrance of the auditorium.

“Awright, we’re starting off with none other than...! The school’s pride and joy, the class-wide events! Actually, I was gonna start off with A Class, but F Class’s event is crazy popular~”

Students and livestream audiences alike began swarming around Amy more and more.

“Which is why I decided to do F Class first!”

Amy lifted an index finger into the air to catch the attention of the audience.

“That is... the Haunted House at the grand auditorium!”

But in contrast to her enthusiasm, her viewers had a rather lukewarm reaction to the news.

– how scary would a haunted house made by students be tho?

– tbh how are you gonna beat the costume fx of a theme park? feels like theyre gonna pop out in white burial clothes and ketchup on their mouths...

– ↑lmaooooooooo spoilers

To add to the disappointment, Amy was a pro streamer—a veteran who had gone and experienced theme parks from all over.

“Aw, still, everyone worked hard on this! Why don’t you all get in the party mood already? That’s what they opened this festival for!”

Amy scratched her head.

“I don’t really wanna say this, but... like everyone’s said, I’m a pro, so there isn’t much of a chance of me being scared...”

*Creak—*

Amy opened the door to the grand auditorium and entered the attraction.

Renia, who was accepting tickets at the entrance, smiled in an ominous manner.

“I hope you have a wonderful experience today...”

*Snnk. Snnk.*

The feel of dirt beneath her feet... Dark surroundings... Windows that shone with blue light, making it look as if it was the middle of the night.

Amy gulped without thinking.

“Whadda hell...?”

The viewers’ reactions were not much different from hers.

– how tf did you guys... make this...?

– yall put dirt on an auditorium floor? lol

– lmaooo do they teach you stage design at hunter schools these days?

Question marks flooded the chat.

Amy herself was also taken aback.

“The st-stage design is r-really impressive. It might actually be a little creepy... but the disguises are what’s most important!”

Amy coughed loudly to regain her composure.

– that’s true~

– stage makeup is hard lol

– fair enough;; its not like theres a makeup specialist among the students, and you cant really up the quality on ghost costumes, kek.

Amy walked ahead slowly, urged on by her (self-proclaimed) expert viewers.

While the subject of the broadcast was a mere school festival, countless people were watching it because a celebrity like Amy was streaming it.

*Rattle!*

Amy, who was too focused on looking ahead, had managed to step on a skull on the ground.

“Waugh! What the! Th-that scared me...”

Amy had always been a skittish sort of person ever since she was little. Add on nervousness to that disposition of hers, and Amy was jumping at every little thing.

– she’s scared of skull models now lol

– this is why i watch these...

– isnt it about time she stopped T\_T being scared of this stuff

Amy tried to bluff her way through her own reactions. “Aw, c’mon, I wasn’t scared. I was just surprised because I thought I was gonna fall. Look here.”

She crouched down and picked up the skull in her hands.

“You can tell it’s a model immediately...”

“Clack! Clack!”

The skull suddenly began to rattle its jaw.

“Huh?”

Amy was dumbfounded, unable to understand what was going on. Right beside her, the headless body of a skeleton began to slowly rise up from the ground.

“Clack?”

The skull in her hand rattled its jaws once again. At that point, the body of the skeleton had fully risen and was standing right next to Amy.

“The bones! The bones are movinggggggggg!!”

Brain finally catching up, Amy screamed and ran forwards like her life depended on it.

“Th-th-the bones! The skeleton body wasn’t even a costume! There’s ghosts here! Actual ghosts... cough! Cough!”

\* \* \*

She was so surprised that she had managed to choke on her own spit.

Even the viewers, also surprised, were furiously typing in the chat.

– the hell is this? lmaoooooo

– CG? no seriously tho lol

– i wasnt expecting anything, but that totally got me lmao, amy’s gonna have to be sent to the hospital by the end of this.

As they were doing so, Amy suddenly heard someone breathing oddly in her vicinity

“Grrr... grrr...”

A man with no hair on his head was breathing heavily while staring at the wall; his skin was pale and blue, like a corpse’s.

“Heh, heh heh... this place is nuts,” she muttered, “I’m not gonna look at this. I’m just gonna go. Not even gonna talk to this guy.”

– Muttering ON!

– Escaping reality ON!

– She won’t be able to go past him~

Amy's viewers continued to mock her. Even still, she didn't stop talking to herself.

"If... If he tries to jump me. I dunno. I'll push him on the ground. I'll do it... I'm just gonna walk by him. I'm done. Enjoyment over. I'm never doing a haunted house livestream ever again. I'm never coming back..."

*Sneak sneak.*

For every step Amy took, she muttered words towards the man as if trying to warn him.

But right as she moved close to him.

"Grr, grr... gr..."

His breathing changed as if he had noticed her presence.

Amy's heart felt like it was going to burst out of her chest. She was certain she was dead meat. Nonetheless, she took a careful step forward.

Very slowly, in order to not aggravate the other...

*Tap.*

But her foot managed to kick a pebble on the ground.

"Ah?"

The man turned his head towards the sound.

Unseeing eyes... A gaping, drooling mouth... The man in front of Amy was a ghoul.

"Graaaaargh!!"

The ghoul bared its sharp teeth at her and screamed.

Amy followed suit, “Aaaaaah!!”

The decibels her own scream reached was in no way lower than the ghouls cry. Reflexively, Amy shoved the ghouls trying to attack her.

“Don’t come near meeeee!!”

*Plop.*

—And its arm fell from its socket as if it were nothing.

Snot dribbling down her nose, Amy bolted.

“Shit... really... the person who suggested this... Is insane! Sniff, for real! Gasp, I just gotta run for now!! Sniff!”

She made her way towards the exit, carelessly wiping snot off her nose with her hands.

But that time, someone swung a greatsword in front of her face.

*Boom!*

The weapon only just barely missed her body as it fell onto the ground.

“Eek! This is fucking insane. Hey, you! Are you serious? What if someone gets hit by that for real?!”

The death knight watched her with its red eyes as if apologizing for missing.

“My mas... ter told me... to show her enemies... a fear worse than, death...”

The sight of its glowing eyes on its visage truly scared her worse than death.

“Sob, shit! I’m dun’! For real. For real! I’m gunna leave! Nobody come



here! Wahh, hick!”

Defeated, Amy fell on the ground and crawled away on all fours like a turtle.

**[AmyChan donated 200,000 won!]**

**– ngl its funny how fast she is lol**

**– amy T\_\_\_T**

**– the hell... do some of the students have a haunted house trait or smth?**

**– lol maybe they’re specially hired for theme parks and stuff**

The chat began scrolling faster and faster, not that Amy had any spare time to read it. She was running away with all her might, snot and tears dribbling down her face.

“If I, *pant pant!* I’m serious! If I ever go to a haunted house again, It’ll... be too soon! I’m never doing this again! Ever. Everrrrrrrr!!”

As if responding to her wishes, the light from the exit slowly appeared in the distance.

“Gasp, gasp... that’s the end. Th-the light, the light... This really is the end!”

Amy’s tear-ridden face was completely swept up in relief at the thought of surviving the ordeal.

But right as she thought so, her entire body stiffened.

“Huh?”

Amy froze over like a frog in front of a snake. From the pitch black surroundings, the eyes of a predator loomed over Amy—they belonged to Lilith and her skill, [Petrifying Gaze].

*Step. Step.*

A haughty empress slowly stepped out from the darkness.

“You poor child...”

Lilith’s voice was alluring, yet chilling. Amy couldn’t turn her head away from it.

“Uu, uuu...”

Unable to move even her mouth, all she could do was cry on the spot.

Lilith lowered her head and whispered into Amy’s ear, voice honey-sweet.

“My master... wants... your fear.”

“Uuu... who is this woman... her horns are touching my ear. Sob, uuu...”

Amy sniffled, showing she was plenty scared already.

The rank 5 boss, Lilith, gently stroked her head as if finding her cute.

“So be thankful of my master’s mercy... worship with all of your heart the fact that she only wants your terror, and not your life...”

“Uuu, hic, uuu...”

Amy nodded her head with all of her might as the paralysis wore off.

“I-I worship it. Sob, I do, I really do. Seriously... thank you for not killing me. Sniff!”

She walked towards the entrance, thanking a master whose identity she did not even know.

- today's livestream was nuts kek
- whos that woman lmao
- now that i think about it isn't f class where shin yusung is?
- lmao i guess f class is the future

Amy, crying her eyes out, and her viewers, laughing their asses off.

Lilith held the girl's hand and led her outside.

"Did you enjoy the haunted house?"

"Hiik, sniff..."

"Then please visit us again next time."



Lilith giggled and waved her hand.

Amy hurriedly shook her head in response. “Dun’ wanna... sniff, gasp, sob! Gasp!”

She wiped her nose again.

Sumire, at the exit, watched her do so and tilted her head in confusion.

“...Why is she c-crying?”

Due to a high-quality haunted house, where everything was ‘real’, the thought that she was the cause of Amy’s suffering didn’t even cross Sumire’s mind.

“Then, Sumire, shall we go?”

YuSung, who was standing next to her, checked his Pocket as he said so. Sumire quickly nodded.

“Oh, yes! It looks like it’s time! Th-then I’ll leave it to you, Miss Lili!”

Sumire left orders to the succubus and left. The silly grin on her face made her look happier than she had ever been before.

“Alright, Master!”

Thankfully, Lilith’s happiness was directly tied to the happiness of her master, Sumire. A bright smile unbefitting of a succubus appeared on Lilith’s face as she waved goodbye.

“Let me take care of everything on this end! Please enjoy the festival!”

She truly was a loyal familiar.

# Chapter 92

People were milling about the grassy park, picnic mats in hand. The event that the first-year S Class students had prepared was a play.

The performances had a casual atmosphere that let families watch the show together. Adding to that was the selling of food and drinks in order to increase the event's profits.

Sumire stared at YuSung with a face filled with excitement.

"I-I'm so excited to see a play at our school!"

It would be YuSung's first time seeing a play. His interest was, however, more focused on the lunch that Sumire had brought with her.

"...I smell something fried. Oh, it's karaage, isn't it?"

"Correct. Huhu... I even prepared a special sauce and some sandwiches this time s-since you ate light this morning!"

Sumire's ears turned red as she seemingly recalled the breakfast she had eaten with him.

Right as the play was about to start, S Class's Lee ChaeHyun approached them.

"What will you be ordering? You know it's basic manners to at least order a drink, even if you bring something else to eat, right?"

"Oh, then we'll order the lemonade and the banana shake..."

"One lemonade; one banana shake, correct?" confirmed Lee ChaeHyun.

Sumire warily added more to the order.

“Oh... sorry. Can we also add a milkshake and strawberry shake?”

“Huh? Okay~ buy as much as you want, all the better for us. Are you expecting more people? This is a lot to drink.”

Sumire just smiled awkwardly. Considering YuSung’s appetite, it might not even be enough.

— The Outbreak: a catastrophe that hit humanity. As Earth merged with a different dimension...

The loudspeakers boomed with the play’s narration.

The play being held at Gaon, a hunter academy, was naturally about hunters. The narrator was weaving a tale famous enough to become a common bedtime story.

— Evil witches eventually began crossing over into our world.

— Luisa, the Winter Witch with a frozen heart, Laplace, the Wicked Witch who spread plagues, and...

The play continued.

Sumire was engrossed in the story. Watching her, YuSung began remembering the events that took place in the Castle of Phantasms.

‘Laplace... so she’s the owner of the fragment that Sumire obtained.’

YuSung had only reported the existence of Sumire’s fragment to Kang YuChan, the Association chairman—someone he could trust.

The fragment was from the Wicked Witch, a powerful existence even among the rank 7 bosses.

If news of it spread through, there was a chance of those seeking to use the power for themselves cropping up.

‘Sumire herself doesn’t seem to think too much about its potential, though...’

The power she wielded was definitely dangerous. Depending on how it was wielded, it could save someone’s life. If used improperly, it could run rampant and cause an incredible amount of damage.

One thing that could not be denied, however, was that Sumire was an incredibly strong asset to the party.

‘...It’s my responsibility, as the party leader, to help guide her along.’

YuSung stared intensely at the girl, shoving karaage into his mouth all the while.

Sumire eventually noticed his feverish glare.

‘Y-YuSung-ssi is looking at me so intensely...’

She twiddled her fingers, unable to even muster up the courage to ask why he was doing so.

– The oh-so-Wicked Witch screamed loudly as she fell to the strength of the hunters.

The narration returned.

At some point, the play began reaching its end. A female student from S Class played the role of Laplace.

“Even if the blizzards lift and the plagues fade, we witches will not die!” she screamed.

While very different from the composed Laplace that Sumire had met, she still seemed to enjoy watching the play.

“Laplace-ssi... is really hated.”

“No one would like someone who spreads plagues, after all.”



Sumire nodded her head at YuSung's words. Even so, an odd feeling was left in her heart.

Laplace, the Wicked Witch... Her existence itself had spread diseases among humans.

Sumire had hurt her friends because she had lost control of her Trait.

'Maybe our synchronization rate was so high because... '

Her expression darkened.

YuSung grabbed another piece of karaage and spoke up.

"You're different."

"Eh, huh?!"

Sumire was startled.

"...Sumire," he continued calmly, "Someone like you will be able to use Laplace's power to protect others rather than hurt them."

YuSung's comforting words had gotten straight to the core of Sumire's worries. Feeling the telltale stinging of her tear glands welling up, she instead wiped the corners of her eyes with the back of her hand and smiled brightly towards the boy.

"...O-of course I can, right?"

\* \* \*

5:50 PM.

In the extravagant A class café, the luxury-brand chairs and various furniture being used at the event made it hard to believe that it was a school festival.

"I heard one of these chairs cost several million won."

“How many times more is that compared to the amount of money we earned at the café today?”

“...Dunno. I can’t believe a student bought all of these to use as decorations.”

“Just how much money does she have?”

The students were chatting amongst themselves about the gargantuan monetary scale EunAh operated on. In exchange, much like a queen, she had not lifted a single finger in order to get ready for the event—that was up to the rest of A Class.

Not a single person complained, however.

EunAh simply drank coffee, eyes closed, as she waited for someone.

*Step step.*

She heard footsteps approaching. EunAh, eyes still closed, began to speak.

“So you’re here.”

“It’s almost six o’clock.”

YuSung sat on the seat across from EunAh's. She was at the point where she could identify him from the sound of his steps.

EunAh savored the taste of the coffee in her cup, pinky finger elegantly raised. The beans used for it were the highest-grade Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee beans. It was also something that she had provided for A Class.

“You know where we’re going, right?” she asked, poise relaxed.

YuSung nodded his head. “I know it’s a ballroom of some sort.”

“There’s still a way to go before nighttime, though. Why don’t we chat

until then?”

In fact, there was a lot that EunAh wanted to talk to YuSung about.

[I want to see that friend of yours, Shin YuSung, at least once...]

The first time she and her brother had talked about it was when JunHyuk was in the hospital.

[Why, brother?]

[Hmm, since he saved my life?]

[Well... I guess.]

[He's your party leader as well, EunAh. Why don't we eat dinner together sometime?]

JunHyuk's words were convincing when she had heard them. When she was about to bring it up to YuSung, however, she felt weird about it.

‘...He might misunderstand me if I suddenly invite him to my home.’

YuSung, seeing the serious expression on EunAh's face, decided to take the initiative and ask a question first.

“So you have something you want to talk with me about?”

EunAh gathered her thoughts, and then let out a sigh. Just as she thought, she had no talent in beating around the bush.

“...M-my brother says, ‘thank you’.”

She began drawing circles on the surface of the table with her index finger.

“I'm also grateful to you...”

EunAh tried to meet YuSung's gaze only to quickly aim her eyes back down to her cup. She was no good at handling discussions about anything personal such as giving someone sincere thanks.

"Anyone in my position would have done the same," he replied calmly.

At some point, YuSung had bought and started drinking a caramel macchiato. The YuSung from the past would have never even been able to imagine something like that existing. Because of what he experienced with EunAh, however, he had learned just how delicious caramel macchiatos were; he could even order them by himself at a café.

"We're also members of the same party, you know."

YuSung stirred his drink and laughed.

EunAh, too, smirked and laughed in place of expressing her thanks.

"...Well, I knew you'd say something like that."

Heart settled, she finally locked eyes with him.

"Speaking of... why don't you come to the social being held by the Shinsung group?"

"A social?"

YuSung, having lived on Martial Spirits' Mountain, had never gone to a social in his life. The ones held by the Shinsung group were, of course, incredibly secretive—bigwigs from politics and various other areas of society gathered there.

Even so, EunAh talked about it in a flippant manner.

"...There isn't much there, really. You eat good food, greet people, and pass some time. That's it."

The one with the highest status at the social was Kim SeokHan, the head of the Shinsung group. His granddaughter, EunAh, was always at the center of attention.

She wasn't a fan of those gatherings, however. The thought of people approaching her because of her background made the hairs on her skin stand on end.

‘This guy is different, though... ’

EunAh peered at YuSung's face.

YuSung received a plate of tiramisu from a student before giving his response.

“It'll be my first time at a place like that. Is that alright?”

“What's there to be worried about? My grandfather's at the very top of the ladder there. Also...”

EunAh rose from her seat and tapped her Pocket.

*Woosh!*

Blue pixels covered EunAh, transforming her school uniform into a dress. She held out her hand to YuSung and smiled brightly.

“I'll teach you how to behave there, so don't worry.”

That was something that YuSung, with his usual personality, might have never been able to experience. However, he had EunAh.

“Okay, let's go already!”

They were going to the highlight of any such social gathering—a ball.

# Chapter 93

Many of Gaon's girl students were wearing dresses in the vicinity of the café, possibly in preparation for the ball.

There was an unparalleled beauty among them, however.

Everyone around EunAh couldn't help but focus their gazes on her. She was wearing what looked like a name-brand blue dress and had freed her usually tied-up hair.

She didn't seem to care, however, it was like she was used to people staring at her.

"Oh yeah, how're your preparations for the International Competition going?"

Three people were required in order to participate in the competition.

YuSung had already decided on the strongest people.

"I'm thinking of choosing myself, then you, EunAh, and Sumire for the third."

Kim EunAh, who had killed the lake dragon subspecies, had overcome a disadvantage in match-ups and had absorbed an artifact in the process. Then there was Sumire, who had gained experience in raiding dungeons and had eventually absorbed the Witch's Fragment.

YuSung's participation was obvious enough.

The skills of the students representing Gaon were firmly established.

EunAh nodded her head. "Good. What about the other two members?"

The International Competition had a rule that second-string members were also needed in case of unexpected incidents and for strategic maneuvering.

“Amy and SiWoo.”

“Amy’s pretty dependable. She’s stronger than she looks.”

Even among the Class A students, Amy’s combat abilities were top-notch. While not as strong as EunAh, she was plenty reliable.

“Is that Lee SiWoo guy strong? I’ve never seen him fight...”

YuSung answered her question with an enigmatic smile.

“Well, whatever,” she replied, “I’m going to destroy them all, anyways.”

Curiosity satisfied, EunAh continued walking while looking at her surroundings. Every step they took in Gaon led them to a place where the spirit of the festival was abuzz in the air.

“Ooh, they’ve got everything here.”

The variety of events being held fascinated her, especially because the majority of them were from a universe completely separate from the one a chaebol heiress was used to.

“Haah, darn it,” she grumbled, “I would’ve done that if it weren’t for this dress.”

Suddenly, EunAh stopped in place.

“Huh? Huh?!”

Her gaze was fixated on a cute doll in the shape of an orca.

“...Wh-what is that? Are you guys selling this?”

Her interest piqued, she grabbed the doll.

First-year Kim JinSung of Class B smiled in a business-like manner. “Oh, we aren’t selling this. It’s a prize! Let’s see, that’s Hwang InYoung’s handmade orca doll. See here? It’s a second-place prize.”

The female student next to JinSung, InYoung was making a V with her hand, though her face was expressionless.

TL/N: Unsure if this is an intentional pun or not, but ‘doll’ in Korean is pronounced InHyung, and it is also spelled pretty similarly.

“I make my dolls as a hobby, but they’re the best in the world. I take pride in that fact.”

EunAh gulped as InYoung finished speaking.

“A-alright! What do I have to do to win it?”

“Haha, customers are always welcome! The game is, tadah~ throwing darts! It’s a bit expensive, but you pay \$20 per attempt!”

JunSung gestured towards the prepared dartboard with both of his hands.

As he did so, InYoung crossed her arms, pressed her mouth into a straight line, and struck an arrogant pose, nodding her head. “Naw, it really isn’t that expensive. My dolls are worth at least that much.”

EunAh was already completely fixated on Class B’s orca doll.

“YuSung-ah, let’s try playing this!”

“Darts?”

YuSung was confident, and EunAh was relaxed.

“Yeah. One throw will do it. I just need to use mana.”



Dart in hand, EunAh chuckled and began doing some basic stretching exercises while still wearing the dress.

“You’re supposed to throw it from here, right? It’s kind of far away, though...” she said, carefully aiming the dart.

JinSung laughed. “Oh, right! Just letting you know, but using mana is cheating! You need to hit the target with nothing but your own skills!”

“Huh?! How am I supposed to hit that when I’m this far from it?!”

“If you keep trying, you’ll hit it eventually, right? People generally get 10 points or so. You need to get 50 points in one attempt for the second-place prize, though, so... your chances are... pretty low.”

He smiled personably.

Many people had tried the darts game in order to win InYoung’s doll. As things stood, however, no one had even managed to obtain the third-place prize. JinSung seemed to think that EunAh would be no different.

“Too hard without using mana? I guess we could give you a refund now if you want...”

His dismissive attitude chipped at EunAh’s pride, and she grimaced.

“Shut up. I can hit something like this easily, even without mana.”

\* \* \*

She threw the dart with all of her strength, much like a pitcher throwing a baseball. Perhaps it was due to the distance of the dartboard from her...

*Wshhh! Thunk!*

But it didn’t land anywhere near the target.

“That’s a foul!” JinSung explained, voice kind.

“I know!”

YuSung closely inspected EuAh’s throwing form.

‘The muscles in her shoulders and neck are too taut, and... she can’t draw out any strength if her feet are placed parallel like that... ’

YuSung had experience throwing rocks to catch wild animals and was thus an expert in the subject. On the other hand, that was the first time EunAh had ever thrown darts in her entire life.

*Thunk! Thunk! Thunk!*

She threw the darts with all of her might, gripping the projectile tightly in her hand. Even so, her skills were lacking.

“Shit, this is hard!”

*Thunk! Thuuunk! Thunk!*

She managed to land a dart that time around. Even so, she had only earned 2 points from hitting the dartboard’s widest area.

JinSung’s voice was kind when he spoke up again. “Wanna try again?”

EunAh scrunched up her face in a displeased expression and thought it over. Still, her eyes just couldn’t leave the orca doll alone.

A handmade orca doll...

Not even money could buy it, and there was only one of them that existed in the world. It seemed like she really wanted that doll.

Right then, YuSung, who had been staring at the darts, stepped forward.

“I’ll try.”

EunAh stared at him, confused.

“The darts?”

“Yeah. It reminds me of the past. I used to do something similar to this when I was little.”

Of course, what YuSung was throwing back then were not darts but rocks, and what he hit with them were not dartboards but wild boars.

JinSung handed the darts over to YuSung. That boy was the powerful individual who had defeated first place in the student rankings, Adela. JinSung made sure to properly teach the other boy the rules.

“You can try as much as you want, but you can’t use mana. Got it?”

“Mana is cheating.” Even InYoung, next to JinSung, threw her own two cents in. “I can’t give my doll to someone who cheats like that.”

YuSung took his position without saying a word.

His location...

The amount of strength used...

The direction in which to throw the dart...

YuSung calculated all that and more down to the last detail.

“They said 50 points for the second-place prize, right?”

In contrast to EunAh, YuSung relaxed his body and threw the dart with a concise motion.

*Woosh! Thunk!*

The result? 10 points.

JinSung hid his expression to hide his shock. “Huh? Ha, haha! You got 10 points, nice! You have nine more throws left.”

YuSung was a hunter who had trained his body to its limit on Martial Spirits’ Mountain, however—the placements of his darts were predetermined.

*Thunk!*

His next try netted him another 10 points.

*Thunk!*

The next, also 10 points.

Despite the near-artistry of his skills, YuSung kept throwing darts with a neutral expression on his face as if it were nothing.

EunAh stared at the tips of his fingers in wonder. “Th-the hell? You already got 30 points!”

*Woosh! Thunk!*

The fourth dart raised the point total to 40. It was a result one could only achieve if one didn’t make a single mistake.

“Seriously, what is this? This is so sick, YuSung-ah!” she yelled as if she was the one throwing the darts.

YuSung once again gathered up his concentration; his sharpened senses left no room for error.

*Woosh! Thunk!*

The dart hit the 2-point area.

“Dang, too bad! Still, you have 42 points.”

YuSung took position, acting like he hadn’t heard her platitudes. His

2-point throw had not been a mistake.

*Woosh! Thunk!*

He earned another 2 points.

YuSung had planted the dart right next to the one he had just thrown.

‘Don’t tell me... ’

Only then did EunAh stare at YuSung. The prize she wanted was the orca doll which was worth 50 points. She realized why he had hit the 2-point target.

‘He’s doing this for my sake... ’

It was a fascinating spectacle to watch.

JinSung and InYoung couldn’t peel their eyes away from YuSung’s display of dart skills.

“He’s getting 2 points on purpose and even hitting the same spot...”

“Goddamn. This guy’s a total darts master.”

YuSung landed the rest of his darts in the 2-point area.

JinSung looked at him, smiled lightly, then brought the orca doll on display to him.

“Your total is 52 points. Here, your prize: the orca doll.”

InYoung waved goodbye to her own doll. “Have fun with your new owner~ orca~”

YuSung held out the orca doll to a bemused EunAh.

“Here, EunAh.”

The orca doll was incredibly cute.

His gift was completely unexpected. EunAh squashed her desire to hug the doll as soon as humanly possible and instead addressed YuSung.

“...Oi, what’s this?”

He returned her question with a smile and an innocent expression.

“Hm... payment for your ballroom lessons?”

Only then did EunAh take the orca doll. She locked eyes with it, her own softer than usual.

“...Not bad.”

Her heart tickled.

For some reason, EunAh felt strange.

Gaze still fastened to the doll, she began to mumble quietly.

“I really do like...”

*Poof—*

EunAh buried her face in the orca doll, stopping YuSung from seeing her expression. All he could see were her reddened ears.

“...Dis iz relly sof,” she muttered quietly. Seeing that, YuSung grinned.

# Chapter 94

*Tap Tap.*

Footsteps echoed out over the area.

Baek MyungHo paced, cupping his glass in his hands—he had been put in charge of organizing the competition.

"It's here..."

They were surrounded by darkness and silence, but the atmosphere changed completely when the lights turned on at Baek MyungHo's signal.

There was a huge glass display that showed off all sorts of artifacts.

Kang YuChan looked at the displays, a satisfied expression on his face.

"All of the artifacts are very good... Good job."

Korea had prepared the International Academy Competition's reward.

Baek MyungHo bowed toward YuChan and spoke.

"The support from China, Japan, and Southeast Asia was huge! A few guilds even sponsored us with artifacts, so we were able to get some good things this time."

"Haha! Right? Give me the list later; I'll give my thanks to them."

"Yes! Understood!"

Baek MyungHo nodded, and Kang YuChan pointed at one of the artifacts

"Is the Star Coral Stone the first match's artifact?"

"Yes. We plan to reward it as a bracelet or a necklace, depending on the winner's preference."

Star Coral was a mysterious mineral that enhanced elemental-type special abilities. Kang YuChan fell into thought.

"The Japanese and Korean teams... Aren't they the closest to the stone?"

"Ah... I was short-sighted. We wanted to make things as fair as possible, so we randomly assigned them..."

Baek MyungHo lowered his head at Kang YuChan's words, but Kang YuChan put his hands on his back and laughed, saying it was okay.

"Haha. I'm not trying to blame you, so don't worry. I came with a proposal."

Kang YuChan took something out of his pocket—a beautiful crystal that shone with orange light.

"This...?"

"It's a Thousand-Year Jade. I obtained this artifact when I climbed the Tower with Yu WonHak. Haha! I never revealed this to the world."

Baek MyungHo gulped at Kang YuChan's words. The artifact before him was Fist King Yu WonHak and the Association President Kang YuChan's secret.

Baek MyungHo couldn't resist his curiosity.

"A-an artifact from the tower... What floor is it from?"

"I'm not sure. Was it about the 50th floor? Anyway, take it."

Baek MyungHo's hands trembled as he took the Thousand-Year Jade.



"An artifact from the 50th floor..."

Although Baek MyungHo was in charge of managing all sorts of artifacts, the Thousand-Year Jade was a treasure that not even he had ever seen before.

It was the best possible reward among all of the artifacts in the tournament.

"U-understood! I'll replace the Star Coral Stone with this as a reward for the first match."

Kang YuChan laughed at Baek MyungHo's loud reply and left. As Baek MyungHo watched him walk away, he thought of a certain rumor he had heard before.

'I heard Shin Yusung is going to be participating under the care of the Association President... So I guess it was true.'

But still, it wasn't a crazy condition. The Thousand-Year Jade from the 50th floor was much more valuable than the Star Coral Stone, so offering it as a reward wasn't bad at all.

*Slide. Tap.*

Baek MyungHo fell into thought as he put the Thousand-Year Jade into the glass display.

'If it goes to whoever wins the first match, it will be Korea vs. Japan... I wonder which side will get the Thousand-Year Jade.'

\* \* \*

Amy turned off her stream and sat on the promenade bench, tired. Her stream ended up lasting longer than expected, and Sumire's haunted house had left her particularly exhausted.

"Ugh... I feel like I'm going to be sick tomorrow... Hehe, but still, my subscriber count increased a lot."

It seemed like all of her efforts had been rewarded. She felt proud when she looked over all of the subscribers she had gained.

"Hehe. I wonder how much more I'll get if I attend the International Competition."

She was smiling to herself when someone else approached her, towering above her head.

"Hi."

Upon hearing the familiar voice, Amy slowly raised her head.

"Huh? Yes! Hello!"

It was someone she recognized... Student Council President Shin HaYoon.

"Fufu. I'm sorry. Was that too sudden?"

Amy's nervousness skyrocketed when Shin HaYoon sat next to her.

"There's no need to be nervous... I just approached you because I recognized you. You're a streamer, right?"

Amy sighed in relief.

'Aah~ So, she's a fan~?'

Amy looked at Shin HaYoon, a proud smile on her face.

"You were in charge of commenting on the selection matches... right?"

"Ah, yes! That's right! That was quite recent. Did you watch?"

Amy thought that Shin HaYoon was her fan.

"Is it true that you're also a member of Shin YuSung's party?"

"Fufu, yes!"

Amy wiggled her eyebrows in a sly manner.

'Heh~ Does she like me so much that she even researched me? The student council president doing stuff like this... isn't that an abuse of power?'

Amy didn't seem to dislike Shin HaYoon's attention, but HaYoon wasn't really interested in Amy.

"I see. How is daily life as a member of the party?"

"Ah, the party? I... hehe... Streaming has left me quite busy, you see... so I can't participate that much."

Amy scratched her cheeks.

"He seems to be a good party leader..." Shin HaYoon said in a soft voice.

"Hehe, yes! Of course! I'm not the only one that follows him, though, he's the party leader, after all!"

Amy began praising Shin YuSung.

"I see... It seems like he's a really good party leader. Then... does he value all of his party members?"

Amy nodded at Shin HaYoon's soft question.

"Yes! Of course!"

Amy's innocent eyes shone.

Amy didn't hesitate to say Shin YuSung cared for his party members; she didn't suspect anything at all. Shin HaYoon looked at the innocent Shin YuSung, smiled, and got up.

"Today was fun. I hope you keep getting along well with him."

Amy waved to her.

'The student council president looks like a good person... I have an eye for people, after all!'

A field of flowers was spread out in Amy's head.

In contrast, Shin HaYoon made a chilling smile.

\* \* \*

One of the auditoriums was decorated in a medieval style, and Shin YuSung and Kim EunAh were sitting at a luxurious table.

"Hehe..."

Kim EunAh was still hugging the killer whale doll without caring about the party's social atmosphere.

"Hey, YuSung... Isn't this killer whale doll really well made? It can even open its mouth."

It was weird to see someone as rich as Kim EunAh liking a doll so much.

"It seems like my arm could fit in its mouth."

'It seems like she really likes it... '

Shin YuSung didn't think it was that big of a gift, but he felt a bit proud when he saw how much she liked it.

*Slide.*

Kim EunAh grabbed the killer whale doll with both hands and placed its mouth over YuSung's arms.

Kim EunAh moved the whale's jaws up and down.



"EunAh... What are you doing?" YuSung asked, confused.

"I'm giving food to the orca," Kim EunAh said while making a mischievous smile.

"That's... my arm."

"Hehe. Killer whales are carnivorous creatures, after all."

Shin YuSung smiled slightly, and Kim EunAh let out a mischievous laugh. She looked quite different from the first time he'd seen her.

'It seems like, in reality, she's quite playful.'

It seemed like her cold self was just a shell. He thought that what he was seeing was closer to how she really was.

Kim EunAh acting in such a way in front of Shin YuSung meant she had opened her heart to him.

*Slide.*

After putting the orca in her Pocket, EunAh got up and stretched. Her dress and casual demeanor clashed with the ball's atmosphere.

"Hey, YuSung..."

Kim EunAh extended her hand to Shin YuSung, who was sitting down.

"I changed my mind."

YuSung grabbed her hand, following EunAh's lead and standing up. It was perfect timing because the song had just changed.

"What do you mean?" YuSung asked.

EunAh had thought about her feelings during their time at the hospital and had realized what she really wanted.

"I want to stay in the party... even after the International Competition."

Kim EunAh had fun with her party members. Even while she was in the hospital, she couldn't help but think about Shin YuSung and the other members of the party.

[E-even if it's a small wound, we must disinfect it before bacteria gets into it!]

It was the first time she had ever seen Sumire get angry.

[She's upset because you didn't say anything,] Shin YuSung, who understood her reason for hiding it, had said.

'Although it's going to be noisy... there's also Amy.'

Those memories were evidence that Kim EunAh had tried her best not to get hurt, but in the end, she ended up failing.

"That's why... I wanted to ask... Can I stay in the party?"

Kim EunAh gently moved her hand over YuSung's, and he nodded.

"Of course..."

They might have seemed like they had nothing in common at first, but they were getting closer to each other through their partnership.

# Chapter 95

Outside of the ball.

The night was approaching, and the blue sky was slowly turning black. Although the sky was still blue, the moon was visible.

Kim EunAh gave a soda to Shin YuSung, who was sitting on a bench.

"Here."

"Thank you."

*Gulp. Gulp.*

The soda went smoothly down his throat.

"Hmm."

"You're quite interesting," Kim EunAh mumbled after she drank the soda, looking at YuSung's face.

She seemed more serious than usual.

If she thought about it, they'd gone through many things together.

The first cafe they visited together, the hospital where he saved Kim JunHyuk, sharing a tent on Mount Everline...

"Sometimes, you seem dumb; other times, you're serious..."

Kim EunAh recalled how different YuSung could look depending on the situation as she spoke.

"And sometimes you're really simple, but there are also times when



you're really complex..."

The Shin YuSung Kim EunAh had seen was one that was reliable at all times.

"Although you look innocent on the outside, I'm not sure about your insides..."

Shin YuSung certainly wasn't a person that wore his emotions on his sleeve.

Maybe it was because of all the years he'd spent at Martial Spirits' Mountain or the sad memories of when he was five, but it was as if Shin YuSung's emotions had been worn out.

Kim EunAh seemed to realize something as she looked closely at YuSung.

She looked into his eyes and showed a bitter smile.

"All of that made me wonder... Are you okay...?"

Shin YuSung silently looked at Kim EunAh. He wasn't sure how to answer. From Kim EunAh's reaction, it seemed like she expected that to be the case.

"Although you're good at consoling others, you're a newbie at being consoled..."

Although she was the one saying it, it was Kim EunAh who nervously scratched the back of her neck.

"Well... it's kind of embarrassing because you aren't saying anything."

Shin YuSung was thinking about the Shin-of family and Shin HaYoon, and it seemed like Kim EunAh noticed that. Instead of answering, Shin YuSung smiled.

"I think my worry is fine. After all, everyone has worries. On top of

that, I have all of you... right?"

Kim EunAh clicked her tongue and sighed after hearing Shin YuSung's reply.

"Really? If you're worried about something, say it. Don't keep it to yourself..."

Kim EunHa got up and threw the soda can into the recycling bin.

"Oh, yeah... Although I'm not good at darts, I'm great at throwing cans."

Kim EunAh smirked and extended her hand to him, and Shin YuSung naturally took her hand. EunAh's reason for taking him to such a secluded place was to teach him.

"You're a beginner, so we're going to start slow. Watch your partner's movements."

Kim EunAh was good at dancing because she'd received an elite education since she was five years old. She moved slowly, marking the rhythm, as she held Shin YuSung's hands.

"Beginners are clumsy; that's why we're starting slow."

Kim EunAh slowly dragged him to her. As her hair swirled with their movements, the sweet scent of her shampoo wafted around her.

"What's after that?"

Shin YuSung was being dragged by Kim EunAh's flow. Kim EunAh was teaching him a simple folk dance that was easy to learn.

"You need to figure out what your partner wants. Do they prefer a slower or faster rhythm?"

Kim EunAh pulled Shin YuSung around with simple but precise movements.

"You should be able to feel your dance partner's energy..."

The sky was starting to get dark, and the moon was becoming clearer. Kim EunAh's straight, black hair was starting to reflect the moonlight.

Her blue dress flowed with her movements. As expected, YuSung was experiencing many things for the first time.

'The cafe... and the ball... '

Shin YuSung was happy that he was experiencing new things with his colleagues. Every moment was full of new experiences.

'If it weren't for EunAh, I wouldn't have been able to imagine such things... '

His first friend, experiencing what a family felt like, and the new life he'd experienced after moving to the city...

All of those were things he wouldn't have been able to experience on his own.

"Hey, you're thinking pretty deeply, right?"

Kim EunAh smiled after seeing Shin YuSung dancing slower.

"It seems like you really can figure out the other person..."

"If you think so deeply, your movements will get slower. Depending on your state of emotion, your movements can become softer or more aggressive."

Kim EunAh looked serious.

Was it because of the ball? She was earnestly teaching him to dance.

"When you're dancing, you aren't doing it alone. You should match the flow of the other person and be considerate of them."

As the music from the ball came to an end, Kim EunAh made a cool posture and stopped dancing.

"Ta-da! How was that?"

*Flap.*

The ends of Kim EunAh's dress were flapping like a baby bird's wings. Shin YuSung noticed something.

'It feels like someone is watching me... '

Thanks to the noisy festival, not even Shin YuSung could figure it out.

'Was it my imagination?'

\* \* \*

Shin HaYoon watched Kim EunAh and Shin YuSung from a high place under the moonlight.

"Fufu... Ah~ You're making me jealous. YuSung... Doing that makes you look like a member of their family."

Her chilling gaze was locked onto the pair of dancers.

What Shin HaYoon was feeling wasn't a cute sense of envy. To Shin HaYoon—the successor of the Shin-oh family—Shin YuSung, as skillful as he was, was an ace card.

That's why Shin HaYoon wanted to get him; she wasn't planning on allowing anyone to interfere with what she wanted.

"How troublesome. If he were alone, using him would have been easier..." Shin HaYoon mumbled as she watched EunAh's dress flapping with her movements.

'No. Is this actually better?'

From what she had seen, YuSung seemed quite fond of his party members—maybe even more than herself.

'This might be the best chance to bring him under me... '

Shin HaYoon wanted Shin YuSung because she wanted to get another good card. How she did it didn't matter, simply having him was the most important thing.

'Then... should I keep a watch on your growth until then?'

Shin HaYoon smiled and turned away.

Even during the festival, Lee Hyuk, standing next to Shin HaYoon, gave her a report.

"Someone from the Shinsung Group has come to the ball. It seems like he wants to scout students. What should we do?"

"It's okay. Let him be."

"Really?"

"As long as I'm the student council president, we already own all of the cards I've decided to watch."

Lee Hyuk nodded when he saw Shin HaYoon's relaxed smile. Hyuk had never doubted her.

She'd created a connection between the guild and the Hunter Club while she was just a student. Not only that, but she'd made it so they could accept jobs from corporations.

On top of that, she'd obtained the title of 'Student Council President of Gaon'.

'If it's Shin HaYoon, she'll probably bring the Hunter Club to new heights... '

The faction that Shin HaYoon created didn't seem like a simple student group—it was comparable in size to a guild. Lee Hyuk wanted to remain under Shin HaYoon.

'I'm sure HaYoon will become the strongest in Korea, but she's also going to become the world's strongest.'

That's why Hyuk wanted to remain under her. Of course, Hyuk knew that depended on how HaYoon felt.

'To her, people that don't have a use might as well be trash.'

Lee Hyuk raised his head and looked at HaYoon—a woman who was born with the destiny to rule.

"What are you thinking...?" HaYoon asked the nervous Hyuk with a faint smile on her face.

He playfully smirked and said, "I'm thinking of how I can avoid being discarded."

It seemed like Shin HaYoon liked Lee Hyuk's joke, so she laughed.

"Think about that carefully... Not even I know the answer."

\* \* \*

Shinsung's group president's office.

"H-how could... Oh, God..."

Kim SeokHan couldn't calm down after he read the message.

"How could something like this happen?!"

It seemed that she had unexpectedly kicked the hornet's nest.

'How did he get discovered? I clearly... '

Lee SuHyun had helped Shin YuSung and Kim EunAh, but that had to remain a secret from Kim SeokHan.

"I realized that from the moment he gifted her an artifact... All men are exactly the same! Are you listening to me?"

"Yes. I... I'm listening."

"A man wouldn't treat a woman he doesn't like well! A tent, and even this... To think that someone so young would use such fox-like tricks..."

Kim SeokHan kept complaining for a while. Lee SuHyun wanted to cover her eyes and run away.

Kim SeokHan showed her a picture of Kim EunAh, whose dress was flapping like a baby bird's wings, and Shin YuSung.

"This guy! How dare he seduce EunAh! For as long as I live, I won't allow such a thing!"

Kim SeokHan put his hands behind his head, gripping the back of his neck.

Lee SuHyun lowered her head, dripping in a cold sweat.

"I... I'm sorry..."

"Our pure EunAh has fallen for a feminine-looking man... and that long hair! He looks like a ghost..."

Kim EunAh was her granddaughter, whom he'd raised as if she were a princess. The iron-blooded Kim SeokHan had become an obsessive granddad.

His getting angry was obvious.

Kim SeokHan gave an order to Lee SuHyun.

"Miss Lee, report everything about this guy to me! Don't let this fox-like guy get any closer to EunAh!"

Lee SuHyun carefully replied, Y-you see... I... I just received a message. The young lady invited student Shin YuSung to the ball..."

It was a finishing blow.

Kim SeokHan collapsed and gripped the back of his neck at SuHyun's words.



# Chapter 96

The Sevens' dormitory...

Although it was already night, Sumire smiled as she served rice with curry and fried chicken.

"Here!"

"Agh! Crazy! How could you make such food in the dormitory? Sumire, is there anything you can't do?!"

Renia was making a big fuss over the food.

They had been returning from the haunted house when Renia visited Sumire, but she wasn't the type of person to send someone away at night with an empty stomach.

"That's right, Master! This food is really delicious! It's the best food I've tasted in my life as a succubus!"

Although Lilith didn't need to eat, she still tasted Sumire's curry.

"R... Really?"

"This is like..."

Renia trembled as she took a spoon of curry.

"It's as if a tiger and a great white shark jumped and high-fived..."

"Ah... aah!"

Sumire nodded as if she understood what Renia was trying to say.

"The International Competition is coming up soon, right? Fuu~ You're probably quite nervous. Nom nom."

"I am... but I'm okay! Mr. YuSung and EunAh are both quite strong. Even if I lose..." Sumire said, a smile on her face.

Renia bit her fork and made a *hmm*- sound.

"Well, it's true that I can't imagine YuSung losing. The same goes for EunAh."

"Right?"

After dinner, Renia smiled and waved her hand.

"The curry was delicious! Tomorrow is the weekend, so if you're bored, call me~."

"Be careful on your way back!"

Sumire sat on the sofa after Renia left.

'Japan... '

Sumire crouched and hugged her knees.

'I'm sure everyone still hates me... '

Memories passed through Sumire's mind.

[Why is a traitor like you...?!]

Sumire felt chills when she remembered those angry, glaring eyes.

[That's right... You probably don't have anything to say. After all, you betrayed your party members and escaped to Korea.]

Sumire had abandoned Isshin's party, who had extended their hands

toward her and left Japan.

[I felt pity toward you and helped you because of that... I put you in my party and even lent you hair for your creepy ability. After all we did for you...]

Isshin and the other party members had felt betrayed.

'I ended up hurting someone else... That's definitely... my fault.'

\* \* \*

What Isshin said was true.

Sumire bit her lips.

'Still... I want to win.'

Sumire recalled how Shin YuSung protected her from Isshin at Choten Academy.

[As the party leader, I won't allow you to be rude to Sumire any further.]

That moment had made her happy. Shin YuSung was the first person to stand up for her.

'Even if it's for YuSung... I want to win, no matter what.'

Her face full of confidence, she looked down at her right hand. As if it were reacting to her emotions, it began shining with a purple color.

'Laplace... '

Sumire called the name of the strength she'd obtained—the strong, evil witch who was also a rank 7 boss.

'The... The more of this strength I absorb, the more helpful I will be to YuSung.'

As Sumire reaffirmed her resolve, she took Laplace's diary from her Pocket.

*FWOOSH!*

Like her right hand, intense purple light shone from the diary.

*Gulp.*

Sumire gulped nervously and slowly started to read the diary.

[A witch is born from a catastrophe.]

Although the diary was written in a language no one could understand, the Pocket was made with the tower's technology and could translate it easily.

[Anger brings about burns, sadness brings chills, and suffering brings plague...]

But it wasn't able to fully translate it.

[Other than... when, once finally born from. I th...]

BZZT!

After emitting a few buzzing sounds, the Pocket turned off.

'T,h-this... '

The diary started to emit light in front of the confused Sumire.

'It's calling me... '

She wasn't sure how she knew, but she was certain it was true.

'If I put my hands here... '

*Gulp.*

She placed her hands over it, and an intense light started to shine out.

*FWOOSH!!*

The purple light spread toward Sumire.

\* \* \*

After the F class event ended, Lee SiWoo returned to his room.

"Hmm, ahh..."

Lee SiWoo was cleaning his guns—a handgun, a sniper rifle, and a classic assault rifle. He had countless guns.

Each gun was broken down and rebuilt as they passed through his hands.

'What am I doing?'

Lee SiWoo definitely hated guns.

He had received an elite education for as long as he could remember, and he felt it was weird that his head turned cold whenever he held a gun.

He had spent too much time with guns.

If they took his guns from him, it would feel like there was an empty void in his heart.

'It's a love-and-hate relationship... '

Lee SiWoo's emotions were complex.

Still, there was something he was sure about... He wouldn't return

home; he wasn't going to live the life his father wanted.

\* \* \*

Sumire blinked.

She wasn't in the Academy anymore. A luxurious chandelier and a table were in front of her.

And there was Laplace, filling her teacup.

- It seems like we're meeting sooner than expected.

Laplace nodded toward the seat in front of her with her chin.

"Ah, yes!"

As Sumire sat down, Laplace smiled and handed her a cup of tea.

- This table and cup of tea are really comfortable. This is all thanks to you.

Some of her strength had returned, so Laplace could make new objects.

Of course, that wasn't her real personality. The Laplace in front of Sumire was an illusion, a fragmented part of the whole.

- I'm sure there are many questions on your mind.

Sumire thought about it, but no matter how much she thought, there was one thing she wanted to know the most.

"I... I want to get stronger!"

Laplace took a sip of tea and opened her mouth.

... That's my specialty. Good. How strong do you want to become?

Sumire thought about Shin YuSung. To stay next to him and be helpful as a party member, Sumire had to become stronger.

"I want to become strong enough to protect the people important to me...!"

Laplace's mouth went up at Sumire's words.

- Asking an evil witch for strength to protect someone important...  
Fufu, do you really think... I'd consider a request like that?

Sumire nodded.

"I'm sure you'll consider it..."

Sumire looked really serious.

Laplace's eyes became colder.

- Why do you think that...?

A chilling atmosphere filled the room.

Sumire kept talking in a calm and more confident voice than usual.

"I... I... studied the Outbreak in the Academy."

- I see... You're starting the conversation with something quite interesting.

"I'm not sure why it happened, but monsters from other dimensions came out through the gates..."

Sumire was a very good student. Her exam results were among the best. Not only that, but she was someone who always had to get an answer to what she was curious about. She was also very well-read.

"Some of the monsters, ones that have self-awareness... If they appear as bosses... they always attack humans."

- Interesting.

"What those born from the outbreak are scared about... are humans and animosity toward the other dimension."

Sumire looked into Laplace's eyes.

"Wasn't that animosity caused by the Outbreak incident? That's why I think the personality within the fragment might be..."

- My real self?

Laplace looked into Sumire's eyes.

- That's just your imagination. There are no memories of other dimensions within my head.

The Laplace inside the fragment was a peerless being—you could talk with her, and she was self-aware and didn't attack humans. What she'd said was, in a sense, true.

Laplace walked toward Sumire and grabbed her chin.

- Your guess is definitely fun.

It seemed like Laplace liked Sumire's answer.

- Good. Fufu, I'll give you a hint...

Standing regal like a queen, Laplace looked down at Sumire. She murmured in her ears.

- Listen well. The way to awaken the strength of the fragment is... your... ☐☐ feelings. Okay?

Laplace's voice was hard to make out. She looked around when she saw Sumire's surprised expression.

"Damn... it seems like ☐ is up."



Sumire then looked around. She saw that the world Laplace made was crumbling, and the world was slowly returning to the one Sumire was familiar with.

- □ □! Someone that □ □ strong, the more □ □. □ □...

Laplace shouted again, but Sumire was left alone.

The only thing left was the empty room.

Dripping in a cold sweat, Sumire murmured to herself, "Th-this is bad..."

Sumire was bad with quizzes.

# Chapter 97

Martial Spirits' Mountain.

It was a place that was very familiar to Shin YuSung, but there was a sense of nervousness on his face.

- *Chirp, chirp!*

The birds chirped from deeper within the forest.

*Rustle. Rustle. Paf!*

Leaves crunched and branches broke beneath his feet. Shin YuSung slowly walked through the grassland that looked like a massive jungle.

'I mustn't relax... '

All of his senses were on high alert.

**BOOM!**

He heard someone's steps coming from behind and reacted like lightning.

The moment he turned his head to the sound, he came to a realization...

'It was a fakeout!'

He quickly poured his concentration into his senses, and his thoughts raced while the world seemed to come to a stop around him.

'Where is it?'

He tried to find a trace of whatever had made the sound.

He felt a spike of fear rise within him from a blind spot as a killing intent that resembled a sharp blade was directed at him.

The opponent didn't seem interested in hiding their presence.

*BOOM!!*

Shin YuSung crossed his arms and blocked the fists, but the force of the blow knocked him back, and he rolled along the ground.

*BOOM!!*

Although Shin YuSung had become stronger, he was struggling with the opponent's strength.

'Ugh... As expected... It's still too early.'

*Crumble.*

The dust that had been kicked up from the brief encounter gradually cleared, and the opponent appeared.

"HAHAHA! To think that you'd stop a punch that contained 20% of my strength! As expected from my student!"

Fist King Yu WonHak.

Shin YuSung began feeling good from his master's laughter.

"Master, thank you for coming at my request..."

As Shin YuSung greeted him while staggering, Yu WonHak patted his head like when he was 5 years old.

"There's no need to be that formal! You've gotten quite strong. To think that you'd learn the fourth form on your own..."

Shin YuSung lowered his head when he saw the proud expression on Yu WonHak's face.

"It's all thanks to your teachings, master..."

Yu WonHak seemed happy to see Shin YuSung—he was in a better mood than usual.

"I saw the duel, but there are still a few areas where you're lacking."

Yu WonHak had seen Shin YuSung and Adela's duel. Thanks to that, he'd immediately noticed a problem with Shin YuSung's Black Dragon's Body Armor.

Yu WonHak looked around before choosing a direction to walk in.

"Ehem! This isn't a good place to explain, so let's walk."

"Yes! Understood!"

Shin YuSung followed him, a smile on his face.

*Tap tap.*

"There are a few colleagues I want to introduce to you, master."

Shin YuSung spoke excitedly, but Yu WonHak burst into laughter.

"Hahaha! To do that, they'll need more experience."

Yu WonHak pointed toward the sky, up to the highest point, where every hunter strived to reach.

"In order to garner my attention, you would need to at least reach the 20th floor of the Tower."

Shin YuSung was just a 1st-year student of the Academy, so asking him to clear the 20th floor of the Tower was unreasonable, but Shin YuSung nodded.

"Master, just leave it to me..."

\* \* \*

Hunter Club, the weekend.

Most students enjoyed the weekend, but Shin HaYoon didn't take a day off.

"The graduating class and 2nd years all finished the requests. What about the 1st years?"

Lee Hyuk dripped cold sweat at Shin HaYoon's question.

"SungHyuk... hasn't returned yet. He said that it's going to take another day..."

"To think the S class would struggle with a request like this..."

Shin HaYoon looked at the other documents with a cold expression on her face. It seemed like she'd lost interest in the 1st-year S-class Min SungHyuk.

'It seems like she's in a bad mood.'

"Maybe... Elevating students based on their Traits is an old way of thinking," Shin HaYoon mumbled in a low voice while tapping the table.

Shin HaYoon's opinions changed due to Shin YuSung. From Shin HaYoon's point of view, Traits were meaningless. What mattered was how strong someone was, but Shin YuSung had shown incredible power with an F-rank Trait.

He was the first irregular she'd seen.

It seemed like he'd left a deep impression on Shin HaYoon.

"Of course... I'm sure no other F class student is as strong as my little

brother...”

After organizing the documents, Shin HaYoon spoke to Lee Hyuk.

"The documents I asked you for?"

"Here."

Lee Hyuk gave her the list of 1st-year students that were in Shin YuSung's party.

"The participants are Su... Mire, and Kim EunAh. These two, right?"

Lee Hyuk nodded at Shin HaYoon's question and pointed to the end of the document.

"Yes. As for the ones that are at the bottom... it seems like they're reserve members."

"Lee SiWoo, Amy... Well, the rest are okay. Fufu, they aren't even Sevens, after all."

Shin HaYoon was looking at the documents with a smile when her eyes stopped at someone's name.

\* \* \*

[Name: Kim EunAh]

[Remarkable: Chaebol Hair/Class Representative]

[Class: 1st year A]

[Trait: Electricity]

'Hngh... Now that I think about it... The heir of the Shinsung Group... There's quite an interesting rumor I think I heard before... '

Shin HaYoon was a member of the Shin-oh family that was famous for their hunters, so hearing a few rumors on the Shinsun Group was rather easy.

"Fufu, ah~ I remember~"

Shin HaYoon made a fishy smile while looking at Lee Hyuk.

"R-remember what?" Lee Hyuk asked in surprise.

Shin HaYoon shook her head.

"Ah~ It's nothing important. Just a prank?"

\* \* \*

The rabbits were jumping around while eating the grass, and a bottomless lake took up most of the view.

Yu WonHak spoke to Shin YuSung.

"YuSung! Look at this lake!"

"Yes! Master!"

He hadn't had a lesson from WonHak in quite some time, so he smiled at the nostalgia of it. Yu WonHak crossed his arm and then raised his thick index finger.

"What shape do you think the Black Dragon's Body Armor wave has?"

"The shape of the wave...?"

Shin YuSung fell into thought at Yu WonHak's question. Until then, he'd only focused on maintaining the Black Dragon's Body Armor—he'd never thought of its shape.

"I... I think that it probably looks something like this...!"

*Fwoosh!*

Shin YuSung raised mana from the palm of his hand that began pouring out in all directions and then disappeared. The mana that scattered away had a similar apparent destructive power to the one that the Black Dragon's Body Armor had.

Yu WonHak clicked his tongue in disapproval.

"Tsk, Tsk. Emitting it like that, even though it might be strong, is a meaningless strength! Watch closely!"

*Whir!!*

Yu WonHak gathered mana in the palms of his hands and spread his hand toward the lake as if he were pushing something.

*Pang! Paf!*

The pure wave of mana reached the lake, and the impact had a meteoric effect.

*BOOM-!!*

A huge amount of water rose from the lake.

"That's how you were doing it. Although it uses a lot of mana, its real destructive power isn't that high."

The strength that the Fist King showed was very destructive. If a normal person were hit with it, they would probably turn into dust and vanish.

Shin YuSung listened to Yu WonHak while making a serious expression. Yu WonHak smiled at the serious look.

"It seems like having good partners has increased the variety of your facial expressions. Okay, now watch closely!"



*Swoosh!*

Yu WohHak gathered mana in the palm of his hand and swung it with such speed that his hand was a blur. The wave boomed and created a huge hole in the lake.

*Splash!*

The lake was parted like the red sea. Although he had used less mana, the destructive power couldn't be compared to before.

"See? The form of the mana changes depending on its usage! Now, try to apply it!"

"Understood."

*Nod.*

Shin YuSung slowly summoned up his mana.

'The form changes depending on the usage... '

He increased his concentration and tried to remember Yu WonHak's words.

'Then... what form suits the Black Dragon's Body Armor...?'

He began thinking about how to get the best possible result.

Shin YuSung's trait worked great in situations like that.

'Think... '

The biggest issue while fighting against Adela was how much mana he used. He needed to optimize the amount of mana to maintain it as much as possible.

'I need to reduce the amount of mana used without decreasing the effectiveness... '

After thinking about it for a while, Shin YuSung raised the mana from inside his body and used the Black Dragon's Body Armor.

*Zzzt!!*

Just like the first time, the mana scattered away in all directions. Shin YuSung tried to condense the mana.

*Zzt! Zzzt!*

The mana quieted.

*Ssst.*

The Black Dragon's Body Armor's energy became similar to that of a well-balanced Obsidian Stone.

"Is that the most optimized form you could think of...?" WonHak asked in a serious tone.

Shin YuSung nodded.

"Yes, master."

After hearing his answer, Yu WonHak gave a satisfied smile.

"Well done."

The student surpassed the teacher.

Shin YuSung's potential was higher than Yu WonHak, the First King's —that's what he thought.

'As expected, YuSung will... '

Maybe his student, Shin YuSung, would be able to fulfill his dream and reach the top of the Tower.

'YuSung... I can't wait for that day to come!'

Instead of speaking his honest thoughts, Yu WonHak burst into laughter while looking at Shin YuSung.

# Chapter 98

Sumire was laying on her bed and looking at the ceiling.

"Ugh..."

Twisting her body, she was struggling to fall asleep. Finally, she fell deep into thought as she hugged her pillow.

- Listen well. The way to awaken the strength of the fragment is... your... □□ feelings. Okay?

Sumire was thinking about what Laplace had said.

'My feelings... '

What mattered was Sumire's feelings, but she wasn't sure what kind of feelings an evil witch would want.

'I just want to be helpful to YuSung... '

She wanted to become stronger—that was Sumire's goal. It was weird because, up until then, Sumire had never been greedy about anything.

Thinking about Shin YuSung being happy made her heart beat faster.

'YuSung... '

When he called her food delicious...

When he praised her after a successful attack...

When he told her that she was helpful to him...

When he made a lonely expression on a rainy day despite being so

strong...

Thinking about Shin YuSung made her feelings change. For Sumire, just thinking about him made her happy, so that's why it was understandable that she wanted to see him happy.

'I... '

Sumire's thoughts started turning into a desire for more strength...

'I'll... '

Her right hand was shining.

\* \* \*

11 am...

Everyone was in the club room, so it was extremely noisy.

Sumire was cooking in the kitchen, and EunAh was hugging her killer whale doll on the sofa.

Lee SiWoo yawned because he'd spent the whole night cleaning his guns, and Amy was smiling as if something good had happened.

'It seems like everyone has gotten used to the club room.'

Shim YuSung looked satisfied. His party member had increased to five people, including him.

Everyone believed in and followed him as the party leader, so YuSung felt a strong sense of responsibility.

"Wh-what would everyone like to drink?!"

Sumire shouted from a distance, and everyone else began replying.

"I'm okay with anything." Kim EunAh was still playing with the Orca.

"Black tea!" Amy lifted her hands while looking at her Pocket.

"Water." Lee SiWoo rubbed his eyes.

Sumire brought a plate with rice balls into the room.

"The snack is here! As for the drinks..."

Sumire seemed used to taking care of her party members, and it reminded YuSung of something.

'I feel like... I saw something like this in Japan.'

His mind went to when they were about to have dinner with her little siblings.

[Noona! I want cola!] Suito raised his hand and shouted.

[Onni, I want green tea!] Tsuguha shouted, a smile on her face.

[Who drinks green tea with sukiyaki?]

[Why do you care about what other people drink?]

What Shin YuSung was seeing overlapped perfectly with what he'd seen in Japan.

'It seems like Sumire is good at taking care of others... '

It seemed like Sumire noticed him watching her.

"Ah. YuSung... You want this, right?"

\* \* \*

Sumire held banana milk out to him. Shin YuSung accepted it with a

smile on his face.

"Thank you. I was just craving this."

"Ah... As expected..."

Sumire seemed happy to have guessed correctly, and Amy was interested in Kim EunAh's orca.

"EunAh, what's this doll?"

Amy laughed, covering her mouth with her hand, and began poking EunAh's waist.

"Come on! Tell me! It seems like you got it at the festival. Don't tell me~ Did someone give it to you?"

Kim EunAh gripped the doll and stood, taking a slight glimpse at YuSung before speaking.

"It's just that the orca was cute."

"Did you buy it yourself? Well, you~ kind of like cute things, after all..."

As Amy nodded, Kim EunAah put her hands on top of the orca and narrowed her eyes.

"How do you know that?"

"Of course I know. After all, you like cuteness more than anyone else in A class!"

Amy stood still, looking confident.

"What are you talking about?" Kim EunAh replied with a straight face.

"Also...! To be honest... It's a bit embarrassing to say it with my own mouth, but I think I'm quite cute!"

As Amy nodded with a serious expression on her face, Kim EunAh grabbed the orca and made it bite Amy's arm.

*Puff!*

Amy's arm went deep into the orca's mouth.

"Your arm goes quite deep... It's very well made!" Kim EunAh proudly said after seeing Amy's surprise.

"Right?" Amy smiled.

"Hehe, but I'm glad~ I thought you'd spend the whole festival inside the cafe because you found it annoying, but it seems like you enjoyed yourself quite a bit! EunAh, you've grown!"

Kim EunAh she couldn't cast away Amy's hug that easily. YuSung looked at EunAh while thinking about everything that had happened.

'Her being weak to cute things... I think that's true.'

Kim EunAh clicked her tongue as she looked at Amy; then she patted her while making an expression that made it seem as if she had no other choice.

EunAh looked a bit happy, although not as happy as when she was hugging the orca.

"What about you?"

Amy raised her head at Kim EunAh's question.

"Me? I had a lot of fun. Although the haunted house was scary..."

Sumire seemed proud at Amy's trembling, and Amy smiled as she looked over at Kim EunAh.

"I met the student council president after I turned my stream off! She treated me really well. She said she's a fan!"



"Fan...? Hngh, really?"

EunAh's reaction was lackluster.

Unexpectedly, it was Shin YuSung who reacted the most.

"Amy... The student council president... approached you?"

"Yes? Yes! She asked me if my party leader treats me well, so I said he does~ I gave you a lot of praise!"

Amy was looking at him with shining eyes—like she was a dog that wanted affirmation.

'Noona, to Amy...?'

Shin YuSung's expression became serious.

'She's definitely after something.'

The Shin HaYun that YuSung knew wasn't someone who would approach someone if she wasn't after something.

\* \* \*

Shinsung Group's office...

Kim SungHan's son was called iron-blooded.

"I heard from your father that you've started up quite an interesting business." Kim SungHan said to Shin HaYoon as he cleaned his glasses.

"Fufu. It's nothing. I'm just helping people find solutions to problems."

Even in front of Kim SungHan, Shin HaYoon seemed calm.

Kim SungHan put on his glasses again and continued speaking.

"There's no need to be humble... I called you to help you with your business, after all."

Kim SungHan gave Shin HaYoon a list.

"It's the list of guilds that will make petitions to you. Although it's a subcontract, there's also a state organization. I'll give you most of the petitions we can give to Gaon students."

"Thank you. You won't regret it..."

"It's okay. I had a debt with your father, so I'm going to consider it paid with this."

After saying that, Kim SungHan was about to stand up when Shin HaYoon called him.

"Could you talk for a bit more? As the student council president... No, as Kim EunAh's sunbae, I wanted to say something."

Shin HaYoon smiled brightly—it was a smile that made even Kim SungHan feel chills.

"About EunAh...?"

"To be more precise, it's about the International Competition. Fufu, after all, she's a member of my little brother's party."

When Shin HaYoon mentioned Kim EunHa's name, SungHan was forced to sit on the chair again.

"Okay, I'll listen."

"Fufu, good. It's just about effectiveness."

Shin HaYoon narrowed her eyes like a snake looking at prey.

"EunAh is the one that will inherit the Shinsung Group, after all. A dangerous job like being a hunter doesn't suit her."

"It seems like you heard something."

Kim SungHan didn't hide his discomfort, but HaYoon didn't back down.

"Fufu... If there was an incident like that, worrying about your family would be understandable, right?"

"To think that someone from the Shin-oh family would talk about family... It seems like you've grown well. Just like your parents."

Even if SungHan made fun of her, HaYoon just laughed.

"Thanks. That's why... I think that it would be better if EunAh didn't participate in the International Competition."

"What makes you say that?"

"My brother's goal is the Tower... which is a very dangerous place. One mistake could lead to death. If you're scared of sending EunAh into the Tower..."

Shin HaYoon talked in a calm voice.

"Wouldn't it be better if she walked off before the competition began?"

Kim SungHan fell into thought at Shin HaYoon's story before standing up.

"I didn't know you cared so much for your brother..."

Unlike SeokHan, Kim SungHan didn't want EunAh to grow as a hunter.

'Still... It's something that was bound to happen. I must stop EunAh from getting involved in dangerous things.'

Kim SungHan let her do as she wished because EunAh was determined. He turned and looked down at Shin HaYoon.

"Okay. I'll let you deceive me this time."

Saying so, SungHan took out his Pocket and called someone.

# Chapter 99

Somewhere, in a desolate forest...

Sakura aimed her arrow at her target. As she focused, she felt her senses sharpening.

*Pat! Swish! Paf!*

Her loosed arrow flew incredibly fast and struck the target.

'This isn't enough... '

Sakura's expression hardened. She was usually optimistic, but such wasn't the case that night.

'My bow technique... '

Sakura's family owned an archery dojo, so the atmosphere was always serious. A neat mind and graceful mannerisms were important.

Sakura had grown up watching everyone shooting arrows since she was a kid, and she had always admired them.

She had adapted her wind Trait into archery because of those experiences, and her father had told her something before she entered high school the prior year.

[Sakura... there's something I need to tell you.]

Her father, who was usually very strict, laughed without any strength.

[I've always tried to teach you the life and knowledge I've felt through the years.]

There was loneliness on Sakura's father's face.

[But... it seems like times have changed... My old philosophy and the archery I've practiced throughout the years...]

His voice fell.

[It just seems old and rusty.]

Shoulders followed.

[Now that I think about it, I'm probably so obsessed with tradition because of how everything is changing.]

Her always strong and confident father felt too small, even for the middle school Sakura.

[What are you talking about? Father's archery is the best! It isn't rusty...]

As Sakura shouted angrily, her father smiled softly and patted Sakura's head.

[Sakura, the bow is a weapon that's hard to use. You need to focus on your control and concentration, and...]

She'd heard this more than a hundred times.

[You need to decrease your trembling and remain calm. You can hit the target only when you become one with the bow.]

Her father's voice had never sounded so weak, and that had made her feelings hurt.

[What I wanted to teach wasn't the art of killing but the mentality in which you engage in martial arts.]

As Sakura became lost for words, her father revealed the wooden board he had been holding behind him.

It was the dojo's board welcoming board, and it said 'closed'.

Sakura had basically been raised in the dojo. She looked at it while her hands shook.

[No...]

[I'm sorry, Sakura... but what people need is a weapon that's stronger and easier to use. Weapons like guns or ones that hunters use...]

Sakura clenched her fists and stood up.

[You... who are you?]

\* \* \*

Sakura glared at her father, whose eyes were red.

[You're only saying excuses... My father... isn't someone like you!]

Sakura looked at the wooden board, clenched her teeth, and left the place. That was the last time she saw him.

Sakura hadn't seen her father since she entered Choten—she hadn't returned to her home because she didn't have the courage to look at her father.

*Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud!*

Sakura shot arrows at an incredible speed.

The arrows hit their target precisely. Even considering her Trait, her ability was incredible.

'If it's the International Competition... Father's for sure going to... '

Sakura clenched her fists.

'Japan, no... I'll show my skills to the entire world... '

After that, reconciliation was her goal.

*Thud! Thud! Pang!*

Sakura was wiping her sweat after shooting arrows endlessly when Seiji walked toward her while waving his hand.

"Sakura! So you were here."

"What? Were you looking for me?"

Sakura was smiling as usual. Seiji stretched out his arms and pointed to the mountain.

"A new mission!"

"And Isshin?"

"You see..."

"Haa... He's become too immersed in trying to look cool while doing weird things like closed training," Sakura complained while putting away her bow in her Pocket.

"Well, anyways! Let's go, the two of us!"

\* \* \*

Shinsung Group's CEO, Kim YunHa...

She talked with someone within a limousine while surrounded by city guards.

- Dear, make sure she doesn't go, understood? I'm tired of our kids getting involved in dangerous things.



Kim YunHa was talking with Kim SungHan, Kim EunAh's father.

"Giving an order probably won't be hard... but if father hears about it, he probably won't stay still. Also, EunAh is my daughter, so she's quite stubborn."

There was silence after Kim YunHa's words. SungHan wasn't going to change his opinion.

- So are you saying we should send EunAh to that dangerous place?!

As Kim SungHan raised his voice, Kim YunHa's voice became colder.

"You were the one who said we should let her be until she graduates..."

Kim YunHa's voice was colder than usual—it was clear that she'd become offended.

- No, that's not what I'm saying... Are you perhaps... angry?

"A little bit."

- I'm sorry.

"Well, it's not like you're wrong, but..."

Kim YunHa sighed.

"Okay. It's my daughter, so I'll try talking to her."

The two parents were against Kim EunAh becoming a hunter. It was something bound to happen one day, but the one who accelerated it was Shin HaYoon.

\* \* \*

Shin YuSung, Kim EunAh, and Sumire...

The three members chosen had gathered for a meeting. Amy explained the rules of the tournament to them.

"Let me explain again! This tournament will have a one-on-one format and three matches. You'll have to win two times! The care used in overwhelming the opponent is important!"

"Wait... what's the difference?" EunAh asked with a non-interested expression as she hugged her orca.

Amy frowned.

"Oh, my god... to think that EunAh would ask a question like this. There's no way..."

Amy looked at Kim EunAh with suspicious eyes.

"Wh-who are you...?"

*Bzzt.*

Electricity appeared from Kim EunAh's index finger. Amy gulped and explained again.

"In this tournament, the first participant is really important because the first person has to win to increase the morale of the rest! After all, morale is the most important thing in a tournament!"

Kim EunAh looked like she was still annoyed, but Amy began explaining again.

"So the strongest person should go first! In our party..."

Naturally, everyone looked at Shin YuSung. Amy nodded.

"It's obviously the party leader, and as second..."

Amy fell into thought. She looked at both Kim EunAh and Sumire. Kim EunAh didn't seem to care about orders.

"Either one is okay."

"I... I prefer going third!"

Sumire offered herself.

Amy smiled.

"Good! Then the order is first, party leader! Then, EunAh! And finally, Sumire!"

Shin YuSung, who was listening while sitting on the sofa, raised his hand.

"Amy, is the map in the International Competition also random?"

"Hmm, yes, but since it's taking place in Japan, won't it probably be related to that territory? Hmm..."

As Amy fell into thought, Kim EunAh waved her hand.

"It's okay. Things will be okay if YuSung and I destroy everything, right?"

Kim EunAh still looked confident.

Amy laughed while looking at Kim EunAh.

"As expected, Kim EunAh has changed..."

"D-definitely..."

Sumire nodded in agreement. Kim EunAh looked at them while picking her ear.

"Me?"

Amy was grinning, and Sumire was smiling brightly.

"How did I change?"

As Kim EunAh asked again, that time, even Shin YuSung smiled while looking at her.

"EunAh has definitely changed."

"Ugh! So how did I change?!"

Kim EunAh thrust the orca toward them as if it were a weapon while frowning, but unlike before, she wasn't able to scare anyone.

# Chapter 100

Gaon's portal zone...

It was the day they were departing to Japan for the International Competition.

The 1st-year students of Gaon were lining up, and everyone was looking at Shin YuSung and his party members—the ones who were going to participate in the competition.

"Haha! Maybe it's obvious that participants in the International Competition would come from our elite among elites in Gaon Academy!" Headmaster Jin ByungCheol said while making a satisfied expression.

A few teachers and staff applauded.

"The International Competition is a perfect opportunity to increase their own, the Academy's, and the country's honor! Let's hope Shin YuSung and his party members achieve a result they're satisfied with! Based on what they've learned at Gaon..."

It seemed like Jin ByungCheol's speech had no end.

Right when the students were getting tired, Shin YuSung walked toward the microphone.

"I'll win and return."

Shin YuSung's short speech spread through the portal zone; the students began chanting his name.

"Shin YuSung! Shin YuSung!"

"Good luck-!"

They yelled other names as well.

"Amy! I'm your fan!"

"EunAh! Come back soon!"

"Let's go, F class!"

"Was Lee SiWoo also part of YuSung's party?"

"Sumire! Your curry was the best!"

With EunAh going last, Jin ByungChul activated the portal.

*Whir-!*

Blue light began fluctuating, and the portal began shining. It was about time for Shin YuSung and his group to go to Japan.

Jin ByungChul walked toward Shin YuSung and wished him luck.

"YuSung, your skills are the absolute best. You have the potential to surpass the Fist King! So please, win!"

"I won't disappoint anyone..."

Shin YuSung smiled brightly.

Shin YuSung had never lost until that point, so for Jin ByungChul, he was a reassuring being.

"YuSung! Let Gaon be the birthplace of another winner of the International Competition!"

Jin ByungChul and their peers cheered for them.

Lee SiWoo smiled awkwardly while scratching the back of his head.

"Although my chance won't come, I'm nevertheless getting nervous."

"Of course~ Our job is to cheer for EunAh and the party leader!"

After saying that, Amy looked at Shin YuSung with a smiling face. Sumire subconsciously grabbed Shin YuSung's clothes.

"Then... Shall we go?" YuSung said to the rest in a gentle voice.

\* \* \*

The next day was the day of the International Academy Competition.

Isshin, who was Japan's representative, should have been training, but something had distracted him.

He was feeling confused.

'What are these feelings...?'

After he met Sumire at Choten, Isshin felt annoyed, but his initial emotion was anger.

To Isshin, Sumire was a traitor he would never forgive. She'd abandoned her party members and went to Korea without saying anything.

*Tap tap.*

Isshin was walking through an empty school.

\* \* \*

As he walked, he began seeing familiar places and objects, and he finally reached a classroom.

'This is... '

The front row—the seat next to a window.

Isshin's eyes focused there, and he recalled something from the past.

[Isshin, what are you looking at?]

[You're so silent today, too~]

[Idiot! That's what makes Isshin cool!]

There were a bunch of girls surrounding him, and someone was studying really hard in the place he was staring at.

[Clink.]

According to the rumors, her grades were at the top level, but her Trait was F. She was someone Isshin didn't need to be worried about. What the other girls thought was also similar.

[What, you're looking at Hanajima? Why are you looking at her~? Isshin~ look at me instead~]

[Isn't her Trait a bit creepy? To create skeletons with hairs... It's a bit odd...]

[Ugh- It really makes me sick. I don't want to lend her my hair.]

Up until that moment, Isshin had no interest in Sumire. She was just another student in his class—that was all he thought about her.

*Tap tap.*

Isshin began walking through the classroom again.

The sound of his steps spread through the hallway. He next stopped at the school's entrance. Isshin silently looked at the clear sky.

The second time he saw Sumire was on a rainy day.



*Swaaa.*

She had been hugging something, her umbrella next to her.

[You're still c-cold, right?]

That something was a cat trembling in the cold. There was a chance that it might have some disease, but Sumire didn't seem to care about that.

She'd taken the jacket off her uniform and covered the cat.

[Nyaa, nyaa, nyaa...]

Warm, the cat purred as if it were feeling good. Sumire smiled as she held the cat; then she went home with one hand on the umbrella and the other on the cat.

The next day, Sumire was coughing because she'd caught a cold.

Isshin clicked his tongue as if he couldn't understand Sumire.

[How stupid...]

The sky was still clear.

Isshin began feeling weird again. His heart was beating fast as if he were feeling uneasy. His chest felt heavy as if he were carrying something.

'I'm the dumb one... What is it that I want?'

*Tap tap.*

Isshin looked at the flower garden as he walked. His eyes settled on where he'd seen the dumb-founded Sumire looking at the white violets.

How Isshin judged Sumire was always the same.

It didn't matter how much he looked at her...

She was weird.

Looking at her made him frustrated—she looked dumb.

She was a girl that was the complete opposite of him, but Isshin had extended his hand to Sumire.

[Hanajima, enter my party.]

Why did he say that?

Why did he make such a choice?

At that moment, Isshin didn't know why, but he enjoyed the time he spent with Sumire in the same party.

[Hanajima... Why do all the cats from town follow you?]

[I... I'm not sure about that...]

The Sumire from Isshin's memories was a weird person.

[Hanajima... What's that bird on your shoulder?]

[Eek!]

She made him feel frustrated.

[H-here's the exit!]

[Hanajima... That's the entrance. That's where we came from.]

[Ah... I'm sorry.]

She was a dumb girl, but for some reason, she was the party member he cared the most about. Isshin was slowly becoming honest with his

feelings when that incident happened.

[Isshin! Did you hear?! Yesterday, in a dungeon! Sumire...]

What happened in the undead dungeon...

Sumire's Trait had gone haywire, so the entire class got wounded, but thankfully, no one died.

[So... where's Hanajima?]

[I don't know. After all, she didn't get wounded. She isn't in the hospital. She also isn't coming to school. Why? I know where she lives. Should I tell you?]

[No... There's no need.]

From that moment, Isshin kept waiting for Sumire. The party was left with one less member for almost a month.

[Isshin~ If it's the empty place in the party~ Can't you let me join? Hmm~?]

It didn't matter who asked. Isshin had left that place empty. It had been three months. Although they were negatively affected by the missing party member, Isshin kept waiting for Sumire.

Isshin could perfectly handle that. That was her empty place—he had no intention of changing party members.

Isshin heard a rumor.

It wasn't that Sumire told him or a letter from her but a rumor.

[Did you hear? I heard Sumire went to Korea.]

[Although she hasn't been coming to school, they let her transfer. I shouldn't have come either~]

[Yes, it's unfair~]

Isshin didn't believe what the girl students said. He thought that there was no way that was true. After all, she would've at least told him.

That day, Isshin ran a lot.

[You're still c-cold, right?]

She was weird.

[I... I'm not sure about that...]

She made him frustrated...

[Eek!]

And she was dumb.

But Isshin had enjoyed the time he'd spent with Sumire. If Sumire also thought the same, there was no way she would've left for Korea without saying anything.

[Ha, haa...]

Isshin caught his breath in front of Sumire's house. He pressed the bell, but the person that walked out of the house wasn't Sumire.

[You...]

The person who opened the door was Suica, Sumire's mother.

[Hanajima. Where's Hanajima?]

Isshin asked for Sumire.

[I'm sorry... Although you came here, she isn't here anymore. She left for Korea yesterday.]

On that day, Isshin realized something...

Hajajima Sumire was a traitor who'd abandoned him and her other party members. His thinking of her as a party member was a mistake.

[I was dumb...]

That was where his relationship with Sumire ended.

It's been a while since Isshin had thought about Sumire. But the Sumire who had disappeared appeared again before a very important moment.

Was it because he was standing for a long time under the sun? Isshin felt his head becoming hot. He turned around and mumbled.

"It seems like I've walked enough for the day..."

His head hurt and he felt frustrated, but Isshin walked toward the dorms with a blank expression on his face.



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